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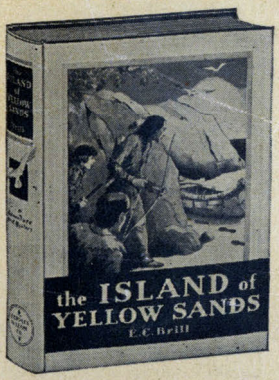

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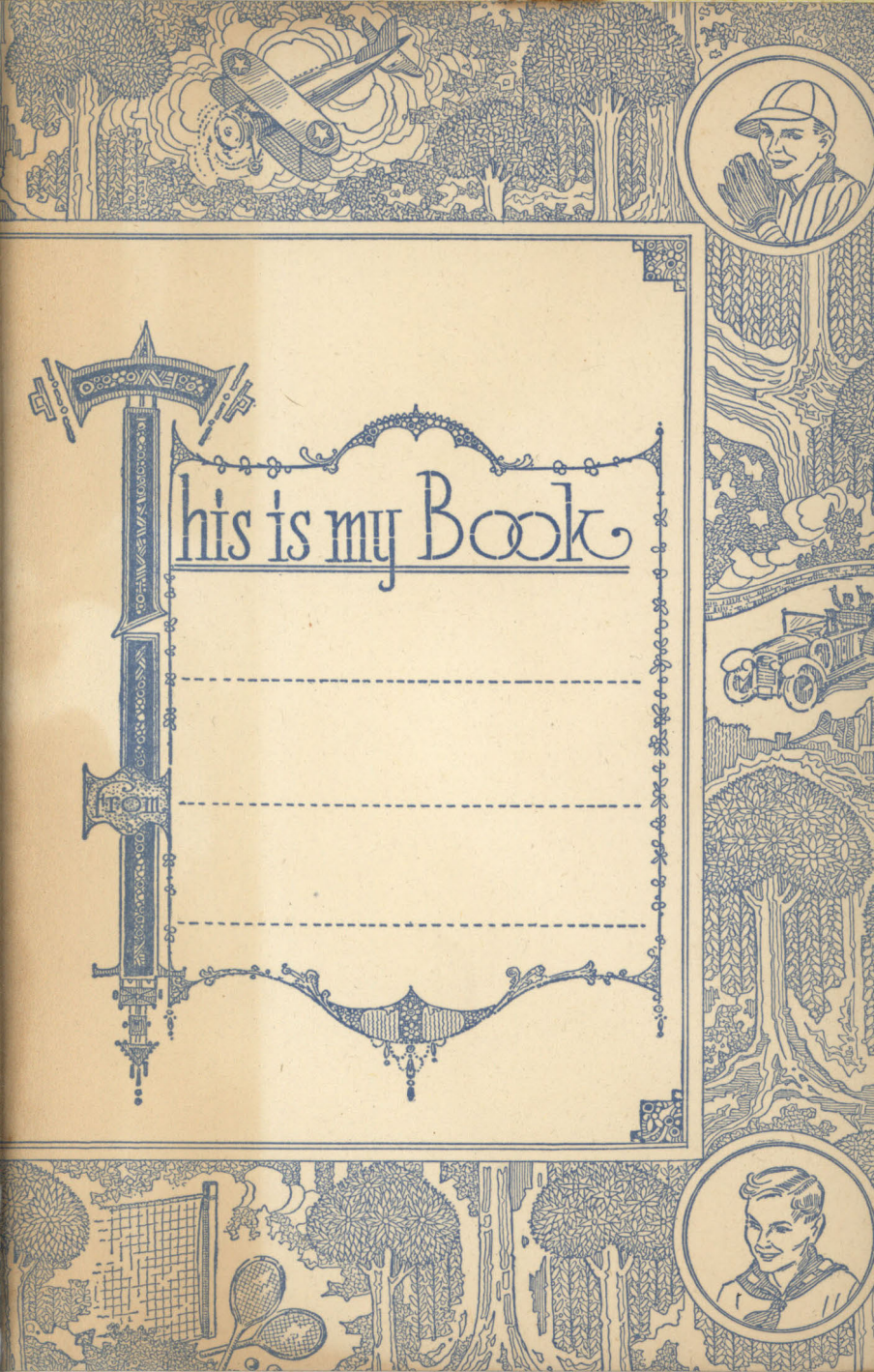
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BOB DEXTER AND THE SEAPLANE MYSTERY
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BOB DEXTER AND THE SEAPLANE MYSTERY

CHAPTER I

THE NIGHT BIRD

"HAVING any nibbles over on your side, Harry?"

"Nibbles are all I am having, Ned," came the answer out of the darkness. "What I want are bites."

"I'll go a bit farther than that," came from Bob Dexter, the third member of a trio of lads on the fishing pier at Belport, a popular summer resort on the Atlantic coast. "What I want are *fish!*"

"That's more like it, Bob," admitted Harry Pierce with a chuckle as he reeled in, inspected his bait and tossed out again, the heavy lead sinker splashing into the waves of the rising tide that was sloshing among the piling of the pier with a mournful sound. "We came out here to get some bass."

"And my one flounder is all we have to show for the evening, so far," commented Ned Fuller.

"Speaking of bites," went on Bob, "if we could only turn to account some of those nibbles the mosquitoes are handing out right now we'd be doing a good job."

"Always thinking of jobs—work!" exclaimed Harry with a pretended sigh of resentment. "We are supposed to be down here on our vacations, Bob, and you can't even come out for an evening fishing party without thinking of a job. Listen to him, Ned! He wants to make a job of the mosquito bites!"

"I heard him. It's a wonder he hasn't some detective theory to account for the fish not biting."

"Oh, you fellows make me tired!" declared Bob in a disgusted voice which, however, had a smile back of it as his chums well knew, though they could not see it because of the darkness. "You must think I'm always on some detective game."

"Well, you would be if there was any chance for it!" countered Harry.

"And down here where we were supposed to come for a rest," added Ned.

"You'll get rest enough before you're through!" stated Bob. "I never saw a duller place—not that I mind, for I want a rest," he went on, quickly. "But if something would happen ——"

He broke off suddenly and, jumping to his feet, for he had been sitting on the edge of the pier, began to reel in quickly.

"Got one?" asked Harry with sudden animation.

"I think so—and a big one, too!"

"Wait! I'll switch on my flashlight so you can see to pull it in!" exclaimed Ned, discarding his own tackle for which the fish seemed to have no preference just then.

"Say, you *have* got one!" cried Harry as, in the gleam of Ned's little pocket torch, he saw the bending pole and swishing line of his chum.

"I hope it's a big bass, and not one of those flat flounders!" murmured Bob as he began to play his catch. "Though it's a bit early for the bass to be running."

"That's one thing none of you detectives—amateur or professional—can reason out," chuckled Ned. "And that is what kind of a fish you get on your hook until you see it."

"And that goes for catching criminals, too," added Harry.

"Oh, give the detective business a rest for a while!" urged Bob. "Wait until I get this fellow up on the pier. He's fighting hard!"

With Harry standing by to give assistance if needed, and Ned flashing his light down on the black waters some fifteen feet below the flooring of the pier, Bob played the fish with all his skill. And no small skill was needed, for the catch, which

had taken the bait, was a big one.

"Thirty pounds if it's an ounce!" muttered Bob through tight lips as he fought to get every inch of line on his big reel.

"If only it doesn't turn out to be a flounder!" murmured Harry.

"This is no flounder!" exclaimed Bob. "There, you're beginning to give a bit," he added. "Now I've got to land him! I don't believe I can risk pulling him up all this way," he added as he looked over the rail of the pier and noted the distance to the water. "He might flap himself off or the line might break! Fellows, I'm going to jump down and play him from the beach!"

"Jump down in that water!" cried Ned. "It's over your head, Bob!"

"I know! But I'm not going to jump here. I'll give him a bit of line—I think I can risk it for he's tiring—and I'll run back, jump down right at the edge of the surf and work him in to shore! It's the only way!"

Bob Dexter was always willing to take chances and make quick decisions. It was to these faculties that he owed his success as an amateur detective.

He released the drag on his reel and let the line play out as he ran back toward the shore end of the pier until he was above the point where the incoming tide of the bay met the whispering sands and the chattering pebbles of the beach. Then, holding his pole high so his line

would not tangle, Bob leaped down and at once began to reel in.

"Is he on?" called Harry from the darkness of the pier above.

"Still on!" cried Bob and his reel began to click.

"We're with you! Come on, Harry!" called Ned, flashing his pocket torch at intervals as the two chums ran back and also leaped over the pier rail to the soft sand below.

By the time they had run out to the very edge of the surf in which Bob was standing, with utter disregard to his shoes, over the tops of which the salt water trickled, the fish had given up fighting and was being brought to the beach. Now and then the spirit of the big bass revived enough to cause it to make short seaward rushes in an endeavor to escape, but Bob brought his prize back quickly.

"Well, that's no flounder!" he exclaimed as he and his chums looked at the flapping, gasping beauty which lay on the sand in front of them, illuminated by the gleam of Ned's flashlight.

"One of the biggest bass ever caught around here, I'll say!" commented Harry.

"And if it isn't close to thirty I'm not going to worry any!" said Bob with a happy laugh. "It was worth coming out for; wasn't it?"

"Sure!" his chums murmured. And Harry added: "I'm going back to see if I can't have some luck!"

"Oh, not tonight!" objected Ned. "It's getting late and this fish will be enough for breakfast."

"Breakfast!" exclaimed Bob as he mercifully ended the gasps of the big bass by hitting it back of the head with a piece of driftwood. "This bass is going to be properly *baked.* It isn't a mackerel or weakfish that you can put in a pan. Boys, this will be our dinner tomorrow night!"

"Who's going to cook it?" asked Ned.

"I am!" announced the fisherman not a little boastfully.

"Oh, it seems he is a cook as well as a sleuth!" mocked Harry, but his laughter had no malice in it.

"Cook! Say, you fellows would have starved if I hadn't done most of the cooking since we've been down here at Belport!" declared Bob as he took the big hook from the mouth of his catch, cleared the line of strands of seaweed and wound up. "And I'll show you how to bake this bass and serve it with drawn butter sauce and maybe some mushrooms and ——"

"Oh, for cats' sake let up!" begged Ned. "I'm as hungry as a bear right now, and talking of baked fish and mushrooms ——"

"That will make some hot dogs taste all to the mustard!" interrupted Harry. "Come on, fellows, let's go! You and I haven't any luck fishing tonight, Ned, and we may as well admit it. Anyhow, Bob has enough to last a couple of days.

Let's get back to the shack and on the way we can stop at the Dutch Treat and get some hot dogs."

"With sauerkraut," added Ned.

"I'm on!" chimed in Bob. "Yes, this is some fish!" he added as he hooked his fingers in the gills and started up the beach toward the road that ran along the bay, and on which thoroughfare the boys had left their car. "Get your tackle, if you don't want to try your luck any more tonight," he added to his chums, "and we'll ride back."

"Try *our* luck!" murmured Harry in disappointed tones.

"As if we had had any!" added Ned.

"You'll get yours tomorrow," said Bob as he walked along with his prize in one hand, carrying in the other the short, heavy pole which he stuck over his shoulder, intending to disjoint it when he got to the auto. "Say, what's that light out there?" he asked as he was about to reach the road.

"Out where?" inquired Harry who, with Ned, having secured the other tackle from the pier, was walking along with Bob.

"Out there," and Bob indicated the watery waste of bay and ocean that eventually stretched to Europe, three thousand miles away.

"Oh," answered Ned as he and his chum caught a tiny, yellow point of illumination above the black and heaving waves, "that must be the light on the

poles of the fish nets. There's a lot of 'em out there."

"The light on the pound nets is stationary, not flashing," Bob said with some authority.

"There spoke our detective friend!" chuckled Ned.

"And," went on Bob, "the nets are off this way, not that. You can see the light on the poles—it's down closer to the water. This one is high—there it flashes again!" he exclaimed.

"You're right!" admitted Harry.

"Our young detective is always right!" said the other boy, half mockingly.

"Oh, cut it out!" snapped Bob, considerably in earnest. "Ned, flash your light again.

"What for?" Ned wanted to know. The three had come to a pause at the bulkhead which bordered the ocean and bay and kept the eroding waves from tearing away the road beyond. In spite of the heavy piling and planking, and occasional stretch of great rocks, often, during winter storms, the angry sea would wash in and tear up the road. "What's the idea of flashing my light, Bob?"

"Flash it and I'll tell you!"

"Well, here goes!"

A slender, pencil-like beam cut the darkness out over the heaving waves.

"There! Did you see that?" asked Bob in a low voice. "The other light flashed twice."

"Like an answer!" murmured Harry.

"Or a signal," came from Bob.

"If this was war-time we'd be jugged on a charge of trying to communicate with a German submarine lying off shore," spoke Ned. "But as those days are gone forever, what can this light mean?"

"Maybe it's something for us to find out," came from Bob in low but earnest tones.

"Oh, there he goes again!" groaned Harry.

"He's off—detecting!" chimed in Ned.

"Shut up!" ordered Bob. "Listen! Do you hear anything?"

The pier, the beach and the road were deserted then. The boys appeared to be the only fishers who had ventured out after a day of heavy rain and wind. The storm had subsided soon after sunset and Bob's proposal that they journey down to the sea from their shack farther up Shark River had met with agreement on the part of his chums. They had had the fishing pier to themselves.

So now, in the silence of the night, the trio stood on what was virtually a deserted stretch of sand, wondering about the strange light and listening in response to Bob's caution.

"I hear something like a big bird flapping its wings," said Ned, after a long pause.

"Some night bird," added Harry.

"No night birds around here with big enough wings to make a throbbing, beating noise like that," murmured Bob as he and his chums became

aware of an ever-increasing sound out over the murky waves.

"Fish hawks don't fly after dark; nor gulls," added Ned. "And they're the only big birds around here."

"Besides, no bird carries a flashing light," added Harry.

"Trying to signal us, it would seem," went on Ned. "What do you make it out to be, Bob?"

"Well, it's a night bird all right," went on Bob, "but not the kind you first thought. Listen!"

The throbbing, beating sound was nearer now, and the light flashed brighter.

"I'll give him another gleam!" proposed Ned.

"No! Don't!" cautioned Bob, but it was too late.

A few seconds later, the light out at sea having flashed again, in seeming response to Ned's, there was an unmistakable roar in the air and a large, dark shape edged in toward the quiet waters of Shark Bay.

"Airplane!" cried Ned.

"No, a seaplane!" corrected Bob. "And, unless I'm mistaken, fellows, there's something funny about it landing here!"

CHAPTER II

THE WARNING

QUIET mingled with the darkness, following the throb and hum of powerful motors and the splash of the landing seaplane in the waters of Shark Bay. Bob Dexter and his chums stood waiting, watching, listening and wondering. Bob, the young detective, almost forgot the big sea bass he carried, the tail of the fish sweeping the sand as he held it by the gills.

"What's funny about it?" asked Harry, following Bob's rather cryptic remark.

"It isn't the first time a seaplane has landed here, I guess," added Ned.

"Not with the Lakehurst naval station only about sixty miles from here," went on Harry. "I once saw the dirigible, *Los Angeles,* pass up the coast when I was down here on vacation, and there have been any number of blimps, airplanes and seaplanes coming and going up and down the coast. So what's funny about this one dropping in here at Shark Bay, Bob?"

"In the first place," Bob answered, "I don't believe that was any navy craft from Lakehurst. I couldn't see it very well, on account of the

darkness, but it didn't look like any navy craft, or army, either."

"They have some army planes down at the state encampment in Sea Girt," stated Ned.

"Yes, I know," admitted Bob, straining his eyes to descry the seaplane that was now almost at rest in the calm waters where the ocean came in through Shark River inlet, forming a small bay on which were moored a few motor, fishing and pleasure boats. But none of these showed any lights, any more than did the mysterious craft that, like some great bird of the night, had flown in out of the darkness which extended half way to Europe across the heaving, restless sea. "I know they have a lot of air craft down at Sea Girt, and probably one or two that can make a landing on water. But, though I can't quite explain why, I think this one is different."

"Sleuthing again?" asked Ned with a half smile which, however, was not visible in the darkness, though his tones betrayed it.

"Well, what if I am?" demanded Bob.

"Nothing!" admitted Ned.

"I'm strong for it!" came from Harry. "It's been a bit dull, ever since we came down to Belport on our vacation, and if Bob can start something in the detective line, I'm with him to the end."

"So am I!" agreed Ned.

"Oh, I don't say this is going to be any mystery that will turn out to be a detective story," said

Bob, tactfully hedging a bit. "But it sure starts off queer!"

"We didn't think, last summer, when we were vacationing at Gib Tolliver's place in Midvale, and when we saw the Chinese in the golden robe in Gib's grape field, that it would turn out as it did," spoke Harry. "But, fellows, we ran into a peach of a mystery there, with the Jint San and all that."

"Yes," Bob agreed, "it was something of a mystery."

"And I'm willing to give you credit for having solved it, Bob," said Harry.

"Oh, I didn't do it all—not by a long shot. You fellows helped and so did Gilly Muzzlewig!"

"Old Gilly!" chuckled Ned. "Will you ever forget how his buttons used to fly off when he ate too much!"

"He was a card!" agreed Bob. "But listen! I think they're putting out a boat from that mysterious seaplane. Come on over to the point, fellows!"

They made their way across the sand, through the darkness, to a point where two jetties, meeting at right angles, protected the land from the encroach of the sea on one side and Shark River and bay on the other. A series of sand bars so narrowed the inlet that navigation for even small fishing and motor boats was difficult at times. The mysterious seaplane had dropped down just

inside this storm-protected, double-jettied point.

And as the three chums stood there in the gloom, listening for the faint sounds which came from the now floating "night bird," it may be well to tell some new readers who the boys were.

As related in the first book of this series, "Bob Dexter and the Club House Mystery," the chief character was a lad, still in his teens, who had made more than a local reputation for himself in solving some queer puzzles. Bob Dexter had always wanted to become a detective. Not the kind on a city police force, dealing with sordid and petty crimes, but one who might seek to unravel the deeper mysteries of life.

Living as he did, in the up-state town, or "small city of Cliffside," as some of the residents called it, Bob had little chance to demonstrate his sleuthing abilities until some queer things happened at a club house near his home. Bob was an orphan, living with his uncle, Joe Dexter, who kept a general store in town. Bob worked there, but all his spare time was spent in reading detective books and in planning how he might solve some puzzle. Bob was not a story-book detective by any means. He did not go in for microscopes, the scraping up of invisible dust from the scene of a crime and with that, and a hair, reconstructing the happening.

Rather, Bob went at matters naturally, looking on all sides of anything that had occurred, and, sometimes in company with his two chums, Ned

Fuller and Harry Pierce, sometimes alone, he discovered things that even professional sleuths overlooked. Bob often said it was luck, but not everyone agreed with him there.

The solving of the mystery at the Cliffside club house gave Bob his first laurels. After that something queer happened at Beacon Beach and Bob found out about it. Storm Mountain afforded him another chance to show his abilities and the summer before this present story opens Bob and his chums had gone to Midvale, near Greenwood Lake, for recreation.

Almost from the first, when a Chinese, in a golden robe, was seen going up Gib Tolliver's grape hill, until the iron chest with the Jint San in it was finally located, Bob and his chums were plunged into one exciting happening after another. You may read about them in the book issued just before this one, and entitled "Bob Dexter and the Aeroplane Mystery."

"From airplanes to seaplanes is but a step," murmured Ned as with Bob and Harry he stood on the beach, trying, with them, to pierce the darkness and see what was going on aboard the anchored craft that had dropped down out of the air.

"It may all fizzle out!" said Bob. "Though I hope it doesn't."

"Same here!" came from Ned.

"It's been dull enough down here at Belport. Not that I mind it much, for I came here for a

rest," went on Harry. "But aside from the big fish you just caught, Bob, there's been nothing very exciting."

"No," agreed Ned. "But we picked this for our vacation just because it *was* quiet. That Jint San was rather strenuous!"

"I'll say it was!" murmured Bob. "And while I like my mysteries with a bit of spice, that one was rather highly flavored. Yes, they're putting out a boat all right," he added, looking intently toward the anchored seaplane. "They are coming ashore."

"Maybe they saw you catch that big bass," suggested Ned, "and they heard you say you were going to bake it up at our shack and serve it with drawn butter and mushrooms, so they're going to invite themselves to dinner."

The three boy chums, in preference to staying at a hotel or boarding house while vacationing at Belport, had hired a small cottage about two miles up Shark River from the bay, and lived by themselves, doing their own cooking. It was, however, camping out with rather more comforts than usual. They had been there only a few days when the fishing party was organized for that night.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Harry following Ned's suggestion. "As if they could hear what we said out there at sea."

"Oh, be yourself!" suggested Ned with a laugh. "Can't you take a joke?"

"I'd like to take a hot dog right now!" came from Harry. "I'm getting hungry! If that fish of yours was baked now, Bob, I'd race you to see who could eat the most."

"We'll go get a feed pretty soon," Bob said. "But I'd like to see what this game is."

The splash and creak of oars could now be heard, and by straining their eyes to the utmost, the boys could partially pierce the darkness and see a smaller blob of black leave the larger one, representing the plane, and head for the jetty. As it came nearer, and as a break in the clouds allowed some faint light to sift through, Bob and his chums saw three men in a small boat that must have been of the collapsible kind to enable it to be carried aboard the seaplane.

Then the rowing ceased, in answer to some low-voiced command, and, with a foreign accent, a voice hailed out of the darkness, propounding this mysterious question:

"What of the white stones?"

"Well, what of them?" challenged Ned, before Bob could prevent him.

This somewhat flippant retort seemed to create disturbance aboard the small boat. There was a murmur of excited comment and then a voice harsh with authority cried:

"Get away from there! Leave at once or it will be dangerous for you! Go away!"

"Like fun! Who do you think you are, anyhow?" challenged Harry.

An instant later there was a vicious flash of flame from the surface of the water, and a whining missile passed over the heads of the boys as a sharp report rang out in the silence of the night.

CHAPTER III

KIDNAPPED

"DUCK, fellows!" yelled Bob Dexter.

He flung hmself at full length on the sand, an example followed by Harry and Ned. Then Ned, who was next to Bob, gave a groan.

"Did they get you, old scout?" asked the young detective in a tense voice. "The imps! Shooting like that! Did they get you, Ned?"

"No, they didn't get me," came the answer.

"Then what's the matter?"

"It's that slimy fish of yours!" gasped Ned. "When I flopped down I landed right on it and the tail got in my mouth! Faugh! Give me a cough drop, somebody!"

"Quiet, you two!" cautioned Harry, for Bob began to chuckle as he visioned Ned chewing on the tail of the big bass. "We don't want those fellows to shoot again!"

They had been talking in tense whispers, hoping their tones would not carry to the small boat or the anchored seaplane. And they also hoped that the darkness would conceal them from the unseen navigators who, because their hail was not properly answered, had fired so recklessly.

"They've got their nerve, I'll say!" commented Ned as he wormed his way along the sand out of reach of the fish.

"We ought to skip up and tell the police. These must be rum-runners; eh, Bob?" asked Harry.

"Sure! That's what they are!" agreed Ned.

But Bob Dexter did not answer. Lying prone on the sand, even forgetting, in the excitement of the moment, his big fish, the young sleuth was watching with keen eyes the edge of the jetty, below which ran Shark River. The tide was setting in, now, and the water was moving with it up toward the shack of the three chums, in a grove of stunted pine trees about two miles from where they lay.

And as Bob still felt his ears echoing the whine of that sinister shot in the dark, he thought, with some longing, of that same snug and comfortable shack. It would have been much better protection from bullets than their exposed position on the beach.

"Don't you think that's who they are, Bob; rum-runners?" asked Ned. "They must have met some schooner from Canada out beyond the twelve-mile limit and brought in a plane load of booze. Now they're trying to land it so the trucks can cart it away. They must have mistaken us for their friends."

"Sure!" agreed Harry. "How about it, Bob?"

Still young Dexter did not reply. He was watching, as well as he could in the darkness,

and waiting and listening, both of which functions could as easily be performed in the dark as in the light.

After the challenge, the somewhat flippant and reckless answers by the boys and that vicious shot, no observable motion and no sound that reached the ears of Bob and his chums had come from the small boat. The seaplane, moving slightly as the tide swung her, was still a fantastic blob of black against the somewhat darker background of the night. Not a gleam of light showed aboard her.

"What was the first thing those fellows said when they caught sight of us?" asked Bob in a low voice of his chums.

"Something about white stones," answered Ned.

"That doesn't sound much like rum," went on Bob.

"No, but it may have been the pass-word, or signal, so when they got the right answer back they'd know, out there in the seaplane, that their friends were ready to help 'em land the cargo," stated Ned.

"Yes, that's possible," Bob admitted. "But I don't believe rum-runners would land any cargo in such a conspicuous place as this. And those fellows have to work fast. The trucks to connect with boats that make shore contact from a rum schooner are always there ahead of time. And there isn't a truck in sight."

"That's right!" Harry admitted.

"Then what do you think it is?" asked Ned.

"It's hard to tell," Bob whispered. "It's evidently something that has to be kept under cover or they wouldn't be so secretive about it. And they wouldn't have fired so point-blank and quick if they weren't afraid. There is, as the poet said, something more here than meets the eye."

"If anything can meet your eye or anybody's eye in this tar hole I'd like to see it!" muttered Harry.

"And if you keep sliding that fish of yours around me any more, so its tail gets in my eye," threatened Ned, "I'm going to heave it into the Shark River inlet, Bob Dexter!"

"Don't you dare!"

"Well, lie on that shad yourself, I'm tired of having it slither around under my nose," and Ned rolled over.

As he did so there came a sound from the small boat which did not seem as near shore as it had been. There came an exclamation either of caution or anger in a man's voice.

"Look out!" warned Ned. "They're going to shoot again!"

"Keep down!" ordered Bob.

The next instant there was a sound like a little explosion, or the crack of a small weapon being discharged. A bright trail of sparks showed out in the inlet and then the whole scene at that part of the beach was brilliantly lighted.

"A star shell!" cried Harry.

"Just like in war time," added Ned. "Not that I saw it but I've read about it!" he added.

"It shows us up like a searchlight!" muttered Bob, looking in vain for some shelter from the glaring light that streamed down on all three from the sky above them. Some piece of fireworks, or, possibly, as Harry had exclaimed, a "star shell," was causing the figures of the boys to stand out in bold relief. And as in their surprise, not to say fear, they had jumped to their feet to run, when the burst of brilliant, white light came, they were in plain view from the boat.

The boat itself was thrown into the circle of light as much as were Bob and his chums. But though the boys looked in that direction they could see only the craft. If there were any figures in it they had stretched out on the bottom.

"What was the idea of that, I wonder?" murmured Ned as the light died out making the darkness all the blacker by contrast.

"They wanted to scare us, I guess," answered Harry.

"They wanted to *see* us!" was Bob's opinion. He had dropped down on the sand again. But this time he picked out a little hollow, which would afford some protection. And as he stretched out in this, somewhat below the level of the surrounding sand, Bob pulled his fish in beside him.

"See us?" came questioningly from Ned.

"Yes, so they'll know us again. That star shell of white fire, or whatever it was, must have made

us as conspicuous to those in the boat as a spotlight makes an actor on the stage. They're making sure of recognizing us again."

"As for me, there isn't going to be any next time!" exclaimed Harry. "I'm going to skip out!"

"Wait a minute!" suggested Bob. "No use taking any chances. Those fellows, whatever their game is, now know we aren't the ones they want to connect with. They'll call it off for the time and go back to their plane, I believe. Then they'll wait. And probably the party they expected must be hiding around here some place, but is afraid to show himself or give a signal, because we're between him and the plane. We sort of stepped in and queered the business."

"Wish I knew what business it was!" muttered Harry. "I'm not at all sure it isn't rum-running."

"Same here!" came from Ned.

"No, it can't be! Where are the trucks?" asked Bob.

This was an argument his chums could not successfully meet. "Well, what are we going to do?" asked Harry, after a pause. "Stay here all night?"

"Not if I can help it!" came from Ned.

"We'll go as soon as it's safe," Bob decided. "But I don't want to stop a bullet."

"Nor I!" echoed his chums.

"Then let's wait. I think they're pulling back

to the plane. Take it easy, now," Bob urged.

This was evident, a moment or two later, when the cautious sound of oars was heard, gradually lessening as the small boat was pulled farther and farther from the jetty.

"I think they've given up," remarked Bob, cautiously raising himself off the sand.

"Let's hope so!" exclaimed Harry.

"They must be desperate men to have fired on us as they did, not knowing who we were!" argued Ned. "That's just what rum-runners would do."

"Yes, that's true," Bob admitted.

"They are rum-runners!" insisted Harry.

"I think they only fired to scare us," Bob went on. "If the right persons had been in our places they wouldn't have minded a warning shot, and probably would have replied in a way to show those in the boat that they were wrong. The mistake would have been remedied and the two parties, one on land and the other on water, would have joined forces for whatever was in the wind. So I don't really believe they fired at us intending to hit us."

"Well, a miss is as good as a mile," quoted Ned. "And I don't see much difference between stopping a bullet fired by accident and one fired at you intentionally."

"No, there isn't any difference as far as the bullet goes," agreed Bob. "So it's just as well to go a bit slow."

They lay there on the sand for perhaps five minutes more. Then Bob cautiously raised himself on his elbows and took an observation. There was a little break in the clouds over the inlet now and he could see what was going on.

"They're letting the seaplane taxi out of the inlet," Bob reported.

"So they are!" agreed Ned.

"Getting cold feet because of us and ducking out!" stated Harry. "Here! What do you think of this?" and before Bob could stop him Harry had taken out a small flashlight, one such as Ned had used to help land the big fish. He pressed the switch several times, aiming the beam out toward the inlet. It was not powerful enough to illuminate either the small boat or the larger seaplane. And if Harry hoped to draw a similar signal from the mysterious night callers he was doomed to disappointment. For no flashes came from the watery darkness.

"They signaled me at first, I'm sure they did!" declared Ned.

"It looked so—what do you think, Bob?" Harry asked.

"Very likely," was the answer. "That was before they had gotten near enough to see us and hear the answer to their challenge. Once they realized their mistake, they stopped all flashes."

"Then something queer is going on here at Belport," argued Ned.

"As queer, maybe, as happened back on Gib Tolliver's farm," added Harry.

"And it's up to us to get at the bottom of it!" Bob exclaimed. "There's a mystery here, sure enough."

"I'm afraid, though, it will only turn out to be rum-runners," was Ned's opinion.

"Well, let's get on up to the shack," suggested Bob. "I want to put this fish on ice."

They hurried to their car, which had been left a short distance from the scene of their exciting night adventure, and soon were on their way up the Shark River road to their cottage. On the way they stopped and bought some hot dogs at a stand and these, with some food they had in the shack, served for a late lunch, supper having been partaken of before they went fishing.

Bob cleaned his big fish and put it in the ice box, for, though the boys were in a sense camping, they had some real home comforts—ice, a gas stove and electric lights were among these.

For some time they sat up and talked about the queer happenings. Then they went to bed, planning to make an early morning inspection of the ground at the inlet.

However there was nothing suspicious to be found next day. A number of the usual fishermen were casting off the beach or the pier but Bob and his chums did not speak to them about the unusual occurrence. In a guarded way they asked about rum-runners and though such gentry had

been known to land cargoes at the inlet, none of the fraternity had been there lately.

"Coast-guard is keeping too strict a watch," said one lobsterman.

"It's a wonder the coast-guard wasn't out last night to keep us from almost being potted," said Ned with a grim laugh.

"Yes, it would have been interesting if the coast-guard had taken a hand," agreed Bob. "But I'd rather they kept out of it."

"Why?" asked Harry.

"Don't you know?" chuckled Ned. "Our detective wants to solve the riddle himself."

"Well, why not?" came from Bob.

"The answer is sure! Go to it!" advised Harry.

"And we'll help you!" offered Ned.

Two or three nights after that the boys, on a pretense of fishing, went down to the inlet and, when all others had gone, flashed lights out toward the sea, hoping some of their signals might fit in with the code of the mysterious ones and bring either an answering flash or perhaps the seaplane itself. But nothing happened.

The third day when Bob and Harry made a trip in the car to the village, to get some supplies, leaving Ned home in the shack, something did happen, and something bordering on the tragic.

For when Bob and Harry returned, and hailed Ned to come out and help unload the car, there was no answer.

"Guess he skipped," surmised Harry.

Bob dropped what he had in his hands and ran into the cottage.

"Look here, Harry!" he cried in a strange voice. "There's been a fight and Ned's been kidnapped!"

CHAPTER IV

ON THE TRAIL

"QUIT your kidding!" demanded Harry with a laugh as he followed his chum into the "shack," as the boys called it, but which was a fair enough summer cottage. "And how's that for a joke? Ha! Ha! You say Ned has been *kidnapped* and I tell you to quit your *kidding*. Ha! Ha!"

"This is no joke!" came from Bob in such tones that Harry stopped his mirth and hurried in, his arms filled with bundles of supplies he had taken from the car.

"What's the game?" Harry asked, depositing his packages on the table of the kitchen, where Bob had preceded him and was now staring about with puzzled eyes.

"A queer game," spoke the young detective musingly. "How does it strike you?"

"What do you mean?"

"This place—this kitchen here." Bob indicated the room by a comprehensive gesture.

Except when they had company, other campers or cottagers dropping in occasionally, the three boys ate in the kitchen where they also prepared their meals. The dining room, proper, was re-

served for guests. But, even then, often the other boys, and sometimes girls, would say they preferred the homely but more comfortable kitchen.

"Well, it does look as if there had been some sort of a row here, all right," Harry slowly admitted.

"All *wrong* you mean!" complained Bob. "I tell you Ned was attacked in here and has been carried off!"

"What do you mean, attacked?" asked Harry. "Who would attack him? Maybe he just had a playful rough-house with some of the boys from the Camp Chair over there," and he indicated a spot in the pine woods on the bank of the Shark River where some lads had set up a tent. They were jolly chaps, perhaps a bit rough, and Bob and his chums had made friends with them. "Camp Chair" they called their place with the usual summer idea of humor.

"It must have been some rough-house then," commented Bob. "Look there," and he pointed to some spots of fresh blood on the floor.

"Whew!" whistled Harry. "That *does* look bad for Ned. But why do you say he was kidnapped? There may have been a fight here, and perhaps Ned got a bloody nose, and he may have chased after some of those rough guys to get satisfaction. But I don't see ——"

"I tell you he has been taken away—kidnapped!" insisted Bob.

"Where's your proof?"

Bob stooped and picked up from the floor a piece of cardboard. It had evidently been part of a box side, and printed on it in black letters was the word "KID." Beneath it in smaller type appeared: "Siz."

"Kid siz," murmured Harry. "What does that mean?"

"Nothing as it stands," Bob answered. "This is part of a box that once held kid gloves. It was left here by the people who had this shack last summer—some girls, I guess, who went over to Parkville and bought a new pair of kid gloves. Or they may have made some other purchases which were put in a box that once held kid gloves. They left the box here—I saw Ned ripping it apart and using some of it to wedge under the table leg the other morning. One leg's short and the table wobbled."

"Yes, I noticed that," admitted Harry.

"Bob dropped the other part of the box on the floor—it hasn't been swept lately," went on Bob. "And when he found he was being kidnapped, he managed to grab this piece of the box and drop it here, near the blood spots, where he hoped we would see it."

"Blood spots!" murmured Harry.

"Yes—look!" Bob showed some tiny specks of red on the torn piece of the box.

"But how did Ned know we would guess, from this, that he had been kidnapped? Who would

kidnap him, anyhow, and what does siz mean?" asked Harry.

"We oughtn't to be wasting a lot of time here talking," Bob said crisply, "but maybe you won't believe me unless I make it a little clearer. You fellows are always poking fun at my sleuthing——"

"I'm not making any fun now," said Harry, soberly. "This is too serious. How did you figure this out?"

"Answering the easiest question first," replied Bob, "it was simple enough to guess that this was part of a glove box. Siz is part of the word 'size,' and when Ned found he was being taken away, after a fight, he saw this bit of cardboard with KID on it and he must have known that one of us would conclude that he was trying to tell us he had been kidnapped. It was as near the word as he could get in a rush."

"He may have figured on conveying something of that sort to you," admitted Harry. "But he never could have argued that I'd take it in. I'm too dumb. Bob, I've got to hand it to you!"

"Probably you would have figured this out yourself if you gave your head a chance to work," said Bob, but there was no malice in the remark. "And now the next question is——"

"Who kidnapped Ned and why!" interrupted his chum.

"That's it. But I think the last question is easier to answer than the first."

"What do you mean?"

"Ever since the night I caught the big bass," went on Bob, "I've been thinking more and more about those men at the inlet."

"You mean the mysterious seaplane?"

"That's it. I think there was something quite desperate going on there and we haven't made half a stab at solving it. But those men evidently fear we have found out something of their secret and they don't want us to learn any more. So they came here to get us, but they only caught poor Ned."

Harry let this sink in, for he admitted he was slow where mental ability was concerned, and then he said:

"Bob, I give you credit for leading us to the haunt of the Jint San, and even Gilly Muzzlewig admitted that you had the makings of a sleuth. But how do you account for the fact that some unknown men landed here in a seaplane at night, never saw us, and yet they come direct to our shack and pick out Ned? How come?"

"They probably would have picked out all three of us if we had happened to be in," Bob said with a grim smile. "It was our good luck and Ned's bad."

"But how did those men know where to come for us?" asked Harry. "It was night—they never saw us ——"

"You forget the star shells," said Bob, quietly.

"Golly! I did! Star shells! I thought those

rum-runners were signalling to their schooner out at sea."

"I'm not willing to admit they were rum-runners," spoke Bob. "They may be, but I can't figure it out on that theory. But I'm certain they sent up those star shells not to signal to any outlying schooner, but to disclose where we were hiding on the sand."

"Those fireworks disclosed us all right—made the place as light as day," commented Harry.

"And the men could see who we were," added his chum. "Why, with a pair of glasses, those fellows on the seaplane, observing us in the glare of the star shells, could have told which one of us had a wart on his nose."

"None of us has," said Harry, unconsciously putting one hand on his nasal organ.

"I know that," admitted Bob. "But if we *had* one they'd have seen it. What I am getting at is they had mental photographs of us."

"And you mean they traced us that way?"

"Nothing easier! One of the gang, dropping ashore in the daytime, could inquire around the village for three fellows, of our description, who went fishing at night, and we've been about town enough so that half the natives here have seen us."

"Golly, I believe you're right!" exclaimed Harry.

"I'm sure I'm right!" answered Bob. "And I'm not patting myself on the back when I say

that. This is serious, Harry! Don't you think?"

"It must be! Taking Ned away—beating him up—this blood! I'll smash those kidnappers if I get a chance at them, Bob!" and he clenched his fists vindictively.

"I'll be with you on that program. But first we've got to find the kidnappers—and Ned."

"Find Ned, even if we don't catch those rascals!" suggested Harry. "But, Bob, they must be playing a desperate game to come in broad daylight and spirit Ned away."

"It is a desperate game, I believe—very desperate!"

"But how did they get the edge on Ned? I mean why wasn't he suspicious of them when they came in here, and why didn't he yell for help?"

"He probably did, but a bag over one's head cuts off a yell very effectively, and this shack isn't close to any others. Besides, I think they took Ned by surprise. Got in on a friendly pretense and then rushed him."

"Probably. Well, what's to be done?"

"Take the trail!" answered Bob, promptly. "Nothing like this could have happened without some clues having been left. It's up to us to follow them. Come on before it gets too dark and late!"

CHAPTER V

FOLLOWING CLUES

BEWILDERED and worried, even more than the usually cool-headed Bob Dexter would admit, he and Harry went outside where they had left their car.

"Take the rest of the stuff in; will you, Harry?" Bob asked. "And then come out here and help me look around."

"Sure! But what are you going to look for?"

"Clues! There ought to be some. Even a master-mind criminal makes a slip now and then and leaves traces. And while I think these fellows are bad actors, I don't credit them with being master-minds in the game."

"The bootlegging game," murmured Harry as he took inside the shack the remaining supplies.

"Don't be too sure of that," Bob cautioned.

When Harry rejoined his chum he found Bob walking up and down the road carefully inspecting the dirt surface.

"Looking for footprints?" asked Harry.

"No. Tire marks."

"Oh, then they took Ned away in a car?"

"I suspect so, but I don't know. They may

have used a wagon. But they certainly couldn't walk along the road on foot carrying Ned whom they must have knocked out. Two men, or more, carrying a limp lad like Ned would have attracted attention."

"That's right."

"And since they had to act quick, I'm figuring that they used a car rather than a wagon. I was just hoping I might be able to pick out the tire marks."

"Aren't the chances pretty much against that?" Harry inquired.

"They are, yes," Bob admitted. "While each maker of tires has his own particular tread, the marks are only plain when impressed on a soft dirt road, and then only when the tire is new. And as lots of cars have the same brand of tires, it's pretty hard, even for a Sherlock Holmes, to pick out the trail of one. And I don't claim to be any Sherlock Holmes."

"You sort of crowded him on that Jint San mystery," complimented Harry. "And when you took the wooden leg off jolly Bill Hickey and discovered why the Italian was raising monkey nuts ——"

"That was easy, and Mr. Holmes would have laughed at those mysteries," interrupted Bob. "But as for tracing an auto by the tire marks, the chances are pretty much against it unless you can see the trail on a soft dirt road, where no other cars have passed, and the tires are new,

or one has something like a patch on to distinguish it from others."

"Then what's the use looking in the road now?"

"I'm not passing up any chances. But I'm willing to admit that there aren't any clues here; no tire marks that I can make anything of."

"And suppose you did find tire marks of a strange car that you could trace?" asked Harry. "Could you tell which way it was going?" He did not bring up these points for the purpose of entangling or confusing his pal, but wanted to be of help. Since Bob's success in solving several mysteries, his own chums had more respect for his mental abilities than before.

"That wouldn't be easy," Bob admitted. "On a straight-away road it would be almost impossible. An expert, who had made a study of the difference in pressure between the front and rear wheels, and by knowing just how much of an angle, or toe-in, had been given the front tires, might be able to decide a car's direction even on a straight road, that is if there was dirt enough on it to take a mark. But I have, just for fun, managed to guess which way a car was going by noticing the marks left on a curve, or where the car swerved so that the back tire tracks, instead of following exactly, or nearly exactly in the path of the front ones, crossed them at an angle."

"Well, that's going some," Harry admitted. "But you don't see anything like that now?"

"No, I don't. But the longer we stand here gassing away on detective theories the longer we'll be in rescuing Ned. So let's get a move on!"

"I'm with you—but which way shall we go?" asked Harry. "They may have gone down toward the ocean or up there," and he pointed to the dirt highway which followed the winding shores of Shark River and was lost in the wooded hills beyond.

"Here's where one guess is as good as another," remarked Bob. "Those kidnappers might have taken Ned down the shore way and have him aboard that seaplane now."

"In broad daylight!" gasped Harry. "They're bold birds!"

"Yes," agreed Bob, "they have to be in their business."

"The rum-runners take desperate chances," commented Harry.

"Forget the rum-running part of it for a while," Bob urged. "In this business, if you can call it a business, you want to have an open mind. Too many simple mysteries have been gummed up because somebody tried to fit the crime to the clues instead of the clues to the crime."

"Well, go ahead! What's the answer?"

"There really isn't any," Bob said with a futile gesture. "The chances are fifty-fifty that they took Ned down the ocean way or that they went back in the woods there. But because they only have Ned, and not us two, I'm voting that they

went this way," and he pointed up where Shark River, which was really a great, shallow bay, rounded up and disappeared into a shallower, narrow stream, winding in and out among the hills and woods.

"What do you mean they haven't got us two?" asked Harry. "Of course I know they haven't caught us—yet. But why would that fact make them go back in the woods rather than down to where they landed the plane?"

"Because," answered Bob, "they know there were three of us watching them on the beach that night, when they started to spill the beans by asking us about white stones. They got one of us—Ned—but they must know, if they know anything, that with two at liberty they are likely to be rounded up. They'll be after us, Harry!"

"After us!" Harry looked apprehensively around.

"Sooner or later," was Bob's grim answer. "And as they have to make two other captures, unless they can make it a double play, they probably will shift Ned up the road where they can hold him prisoner in some shack and then come back for us."

"They aren't going to get me!" Harry cried.

"Nor me, if I can help it!" exclaimed Bob. "But that's a chance we have to take. So, figuring that they want to keep Ned hidden away until they can pick us up, I say let's go look for some place where he might be concealed."

"I'm with you!" cried Harry eagerly. "And I believe you're right about Ned."

"That remains to be seen," said Bob, with a grim tightening of his lips.

"The rascally rum-runners!" muttered Harry. "They're afraid we are on to their game and want to kill us off!"

"I wouldn't go so far as to agree to that last," spoke Bob. "I hardly believe they will go to that length. And as for them being rum-runners —I'll not admit it!"

"You'll see I'm right about that part of it!" Harry declared. "Well, let's go!"

"And about time!" murmured Bob. "We've wasted some time, but it couldn't be helped. This thing had to be figured out."

They locked the cottage and, getting into the car, drove on up the road. Harry took the wheel as Bob said he wanted to get out now and then to make inquiries not only of passing motorists but at the houses they passed. For somewhat past the cottage and group of camps where the three boys were staying for their vacation, were scattered and lonely houses of the "natives," as the all-year-round residents of Belport were called.

But the early inquiries of Bob and Harry, guardedly made, for they did not want to raise an unnecessary alarm, were fruitless. The few motorists they were able to hail and question had seen nothing remotely resembling a kidnapping.

"Though I did see a feller 'n' a girl scrappin' over suthin' or other as they spun along," one grizzled lobsterman said when the two stopped at his dock to ask for news.

"Those aren't the parties we're looking for," Harry remarked as Bob, after another futile look up the road, signalled him to go on.

They were in a sparsely-settled section now, where Shark River was dwindling to a small stream coming down through a swamp of cat-tails. As they rounded a turn in the road that bordered the water, Bob suddenly called:

"Slow up!"

"What's the matter—do you see him?" asked Harry, putting on the brakes so suddenly that they squealed a protest and the locked wheels slid along in a cloud of dust.

"No, but there's some sort of a shack just ahead. You can hardly see it through an opening in the bushes. We passed it before I could give you the word. Back up!"

Harry backed. There was a narrow lane leading down to the water, a path overgrown with weeds that bordered it on both sides and almost hid it from view. At the end, hardly seen in a clump of scrub pines, was a small cabin, or shack. It looked like part of a boat made over into a bungalow.

"We'll inquire there," said Bob as he got down.

CHAPTER VI

THE SURLY LOBSTERMAN

HARRY parked the car in the deep sedge grass that grew along the roadside ditch. There was a stagnant pond of water on the other side of the highway and over its surface blue dragon flies were darting about like miniature airplanes, voraciously devouring such hapless insects as they swooped upon.

"Come on!" called Bob to his chum, as Harry paused to lock the car.

"See anybody—or anything?" Harry asked.

"Not yet. But we may. Step on it, old man!" he ordered in a low but tense voice.

"Seems to me you are sort of looking for support," observed Harry for Bob was waiting for him.

"I am."

"What kind, moral or physical?"

"Both. I wish we had some sort of—er—weapon!"

"As bad as that?" asked Harry.

"It may be. No use taking chances."

"Well, this will do me." Harry picked up a stout stick. It might have been a cane and

he improvised that use of it as he swung it about. "Here's one for you," he added.

"Thanks!" echoed Bob as he took it. "Now come on."

Thus armed, though primitively, the two advanced. It was noticeable that each one was bolder now, not to say braver. It's remarkable what a difference just holding a stout stick makes in moral courage when one advances into unknown territory.

"They'll be useful even if we meet only a surly dog," remarked Harry.

"Sure!" Bob agreed.

But it was not a surly dog they met, it was a surly man and he was of a particularly ugly cast of countenance. His manners matched his face for, as he suddenly emerged from a dense clump of weeds before the boys could reach the shack, he snarled:

"Where ye goin'?"

"Oh—no place—special," answered Bob.

"Then the way to it is back there. Go about and don't anchor in my cove!" snapped the grizzled fellow.

Harry began to sniff the air—at first gently and then in deeper breaths as if trying to trace something.

"What ye sniffin' about?" came the challenge.

"Smells like lobsters," answered Harry. "Doesn't it, Bob?" he inquired.

"If my nose is any judge it does. Boiled lob-

sters are what I surely smell. And also ——"

"Crabs, for a ten cent piece!" exclaimed Harry quickly and, unseen by the grizzled sentry, he jabbed Bob with his stick.

"Crabs it is!" agreed Bob, with a quick and understanding look at his chum. "I was going to say fish chowder, but it's crabs, sure enough. Crabs and lobsters. Are we right?" he asked the old codger with what he meant to be an ingratiating smile.

"Happens ye might be."

"I'm sure we are!" declared Harry. "And I've been wanting a cold boiled lobster for some time. And, if I mistake not," he added, with another unseen, but not unfelt, jab at Bob, "you have, more than once, said you were tired of bacon and eggs and would like some crab salad."

"Sure!" Bob agreed, entering into the spirit of the talk, for a reason he had guessed almost as soon as Harry had started on this line. "Crabs are my favorite salad. Then I take it," he went on to the surly one, "that you sell boiled lobsters and crabs."

"Well, what if I do?"

"Nothing, except that I'd like to buy some."

"None for sale. Git out! I told ye before!"

"But, my dear man," Bob protested with as genial an air as he could assume. "This is a strange proceeding! You are in the lobster business, I take it; aren't you?" A look past the man and in the direction of the shack showed sev-

eral tarry lobster pots on the ground and others down on a small dock extending out into Shark River.

"I'm a lobsterman; yes!" The grim face never relaxed into a smile. And the burly, shaggy, ragged figure stood blocking the path.

"Then don't you want to make a sale?" asked Harry, edging in a bit.

"Might if I had any to sell. But I'm cleaned out. I just sold the last boiled lobsters I had. Didn't cook no crabs today. They're runnin' too small."

"And yet I am positive I smelled boiled crabs!" persisted Bob.

"So did I!" said his chum. "There is a distinct difference in the smell of boiled lobsters and crabs. Perhaps only an expert can tell the difference, but, as it happens, we are both experts," he said, trying to soften the ugly sentry with a grin.

"I ain't responsible fer what either of your noses smells!" was the surly comment. "I told ye I ain't got none for sale, an' that's all there is to it! This is private pruperty an' I don't want no strangers traipsin' 'round. Git off!"

"But, my dear man," said Bob, trying, as Harry was doing, to edge nearer to get a better view of the shack which was around a turn in the path, "my dear man! We come to buy and it seems to me a very poor business policy for you to turn customers away, even if you are tempo-

rarily out of lobsters and crabs. We should like to order some."

"For tomorrow!" added Harry. "Lots of them."

"I won't have none t'morrer, either! How many times have I got t' tell ye t' git outer here?"

"Oh, once is enough to be told, when we are certain that you mean it," stated Bob. "But I can't see how you do business if you don't let people walk up to your place. We saw this path and ——"

"Ye're lookin' at it th' wrong way. I want ye should turn about an' cruise off. Don't want ye here! Don't want nobody here! I do a crab an' lobster business, when I does it, from my dock out in Shark River. Folks as want my stuff row up an' git it. Don't nobody come in *this* way t' buy stuff. This path ain't never used!"

"Oh, but somebody must use it," protested Bob, genially. "For it shows signs of wear."

"I tell ye it *ain't* used. Nobody comes in this way. I use it myself, an' I got a right t' fer this is my pruperty. But I don't allow no strangers spyin' around an' I order ye off. If ye git me riled, onct, ye'll be sorry for it!"

"And you might be, too," murmured Harry, a bit injudiciously.

"What's that?" snapped the surly lobsterman. "What ——"

"I said *very true,*" was the gentle answer. *"Very true!"*

"Oh! Wa'al, better not git my dander up! Now I'm tired talkin'! I want ye should git off my place. Happen t'morrer, or next day, I pull my pots an' git some crabs an' lobsters, an' if I bile 'em, an' ye row up t' th' end of my dock out there, I'll sell ye some, happen as how I has any left. But there's none now an' I'm busy an' I don't want ye putterin' around here! Now git!"

There was so much menace and venom in his voice, and such a surly, unreasoning look in his greenish-gray eyes that Bob and Harry came to the same conclusion at the same time. It were better to let this particular tradesman alone.

"Well, all right," agreed Bob, as easily as he could under the circumstances. "But we're sorry you haven't any crabs."

"Or lobsters," added Harry.

"So we'll get back to our car," went on the young detective. "It might be, though," he said as an afterthought as he turned back having swung around as if to go to the road, "it might be you will have some lobsters or crabs tonight."

"No, I won't!"

"Too bad!" murmured Harry and he could not keep a little mocking tone out of his voice.

"Anybody 'ith as much sense as a jelly fish 'ud know we don't pull our lobster pots at *night,*" growled the old salt. "It's hard enough t' locate 'em *daytimes,* what with th' pound net men an' the boats."

"Excuse us for our ignorance," said Bob. "But

it's quite all right. We'll stop and see you tomorrow, and here's hoping you have the best of luck—with your pots."

"All right. I ginnerally have purty fair luck. But don't come in this way lessen ye want t' git—wa'al, don't come in this way no more! An' mind what I'm tellin' ye!" he warned and there was more menace in his voice. "I do business at my *dock,* not *here!*"

"We'll remember," promised Bob. "See you later!" He waved his stick carelessly in farewell, an example followed by Harry, and they walked back down the path, not having advanced very far along it before meeting the surly sentry.

"Well, what did you make of it?" asked Bob when he and his chum were back at the car, on the steering wheel of which, in the warm sun, perched two blue dragon flies.

"There's something wrong back there, Bob," declared Harry.

"I think so myself."

"You mean in the shack?"

"That's where I mean. He had some object in not letting us go close to it."

"Sure he did! Ned's in there!" Harry exclaimed.

"He may be," Bob admitted, more calmly than his chum thought the occasion warranted. "But what else did you smell besides lobsters, and crabs—if any?"

"A queer, sour sort of smell—a smell I seem

to associate with a county fair, where they run a cider mill. Also a smell that I have noticed on my grandfather's farm, when a lot of apples lay rotting under the trees."

"That's it. Fermentation!"

"And fermentation, in these days, means but one thing, Bob my boy."

"Bootleggers!"

"And rum-runners! In spite of what you have said and denied, Bob my boy, I believe we are on the trail of some rum-runners or bootleggers, or both. And some of the racketeers have kidnapped Ned because they are worried about something he has found out."

"I'll go along with you, but not as far as to admit an illicit liquor game," stated Bob. "There is something crooked, I'm sure, and poor Ned has got the worst end of it so far. They took him and they would have taken both of us if we had happened to be home. And it may be the surly lobsterman has Ned a prisoner in that shack. But if he has ——"

"What then? We're going to get him out; aren't we?" demanded Harry.

"Hark! Listen!" cautioned Bob without answering his chum.

CHAPTER VII

IN THE SHACK

THERE could be heard, around the bend of the old, dirt road, the noise of a car approaching. And from the low, powerful throb of the motor it was evident that the approaching vehicle was not of the flivver variety. It was a car of an expensive make.

"Quick, Harry!" Bob urged. "In there!" He pointed to a dense clump of high weeds and grass, near a little grove of stunted willow trees.

"You mean drive the car in there?"

"Yes, and us with it!"

"What for?"

"To get out of sight! I don't want whoever is coming down the road to see us!"

"Who are they?"

"I don't know—yet."

"Then," Harry inquired, "how do you know there will be any harm if they see us."

"I don't know—it's just a hunch! Go on! Quick! They'll be here in another second!"

The hum and throb of the approaching, big car, like the purr of an immense cat, sounded nearer. Harry had their car in motion now and

drove off the highway through the sedge grass and the weeds to a snug hiding place back of the willows. Yet they were not so far from the road but what they could look back through the rank growth and see any car that passed.

And, presently, one did pass, but it did not continue. It came to a stop about where Bob and Harry had halted their auto to walk up the weed-grown path and talk to the surly lobsterman. The car, as Bob and his chum had guessed, was the imported, expensive one they had both named. From it descended two men—strangers as far as the boys knew. And the men were of the same imported and important vintage as their car, as Bob remarked later.

They started up the path toward the lobster shack, and Harry whispered:

"Now let's see if they get turned down as we did."

"It will be interesting," admitted Bob. But even as he spoke the two men seemed to change their plans. Or, rather, one changed the plans of the other. For the taller of the two said, in good English but with an accent that had something of German in it:

"We should not go in there now."

"Why not? I want to see if he is safe."

"He is safe enough for a few hours more. And we must get the other two. It was bad policy to get only the one."

"Better one than none."

"Perhaps. And yet if we go in now something may happen. We should find the other two—they must be back by this time, and are, very likely, in a panic over their missing friend. We shall take them unawares. Let this one remain here. Besides, we must hasten. There will soon be more flotsam for us to pick up. No, my friend, do not waste any more time about that boy. He will be safe with the old fisherman for the night, at least."

"Well, maybe you are right. And the flotsam—we must not miss that!" He laughed deep down in his throat—as the other did also, and then the two went back to their purring car and drove away.

"Did you hear that?" asked Harry.

"Every word," Bob answered.

"They got Ned; didn't they?"

"Sounds as if they did."

"And he's a prisoner in that shack?"

"It begins to shape up that way," Bob admitted.

"Aren't we going to rescue him?"

"Surest thing you know! But we've got to go at it right. Harry, we're up against a deeper and more desperate game here than I guess any one of us has any idea of. We've got to watch our steps!"

"Sure! But say, Bob, if those crooks go back to our shack, and hope to capture us, as they did Ned, they'll get left."

"Crooks is right, and yet they must be of the higher-up variety, judging by their car and their clothes. But they won't get us this trip."

"Why should they want us, Bob?"

"For the same reason that they nabbed Ned, when they went to our place first and expected to bag us all. They are afraid of us. They have found out who we are—not that we're so much, I don't mean that—but they know we surprised them on the beach with the seaplane.

"They have found out enough about us to locate us after showing us up with their star shells. And they didn't lose much time in making a move against us—they got Ned and it was only our luck that kept us out of their clutches."

"But what I can't understand," murmured Harry, "is why they fear us. We haven't anything against those men. We don't even know what their game is, but if, as I think, it's just rum-running why should we butt in? There are the prohibition officers to stop that. Not that I wouldn't be willing to help Uncle Sam enforce the law—we all would—but I don't see that we are called on to take a hand in the bootleg warfare."

"Harry, I'm as sure as anything I ever was sure of, that this isn't a rum-running game, though I admit it looks like it," said Bob. "What it is I don't know. But those men are in something and in it deep and they're afraid we are wise, which is why they want us out of the way. They

may think we have just stumbled over their operations, which is the truth, or they may think we are spies working for some one else. Whatever it is, they're after us."

"And, so far, they have caught Ned. But they shan't keep him long if I have anything to say or do about it!" muttered Harry.

"I'm with you!" came determinedly from his chum. "But we must move slowly and carefully. We don't want to walk into a trap as we did with Moi Fong."

"That's right!" admitted Harry. "But we ought to do something pretty soon."

"We shall," agreed Bob. "As soon as those fellows are safely away down the road, we'll circle around and approach that lobster shack from in front."

"And get Ned out!"

"I hope so!"

"There's one thing I don't understand, though," went on Harry. "Those fellows spoke of picking up flotsam—what's that? Is it anything like ambergris that comes from dead whales and sells for about a million dollars a pound?"

"No, I don't believe it's ambergris," Bob answered. "Though that would be valuable enough to cause a gang to do almost anything to get a lump of it."

"It's used in making expensive perfumes; isn't it?" asked Harry.

"So I've read—haven't much use for perfume myself."

"Neither have I. But this flotsam—what's that?"

"Well," answered Bob, "it's only because I happened to come across the word reading a story the other day that I happen to know it. I thought it was a misprint in the story and should have been 'floatsome,' but I dug out my old dictionary and read that flotsam is a legal term for goods cast, or swept from a vessel into the sea and found floating. I suppose the word does really come from float, but it's spelled differently. Anyhow, it means something found drifting at sea which can be picked up and claimed."

"That might mean almost anything," Harry murmured.

"Yes," his chum agreed, "and that's what makes it so hard to get a line on what these fellows are doing. But I'm going to get it!" and he shut his teeth with grim determination.

"I'm with you. But first we've got to get Ned out."

"Sure! We'll start on that right away. I guess the car is as good here as any place and it's out of sight. We'll go around to the front of the shack."

"We've got to work quick if we expect to get him out and back to our place before night," urged Harry. "It's getting dark now."

The afternoon had passed more quickly than they realized, so hectic had been the happenings of the last few hours. Darkness was gathering about that lonely section of Shark River. It was a little lighter when Bob and Harry had passed out from the grove of stunted willow trees, but clouds were blowing in from the sea and a storm was in the offing.

"Flotsam—queer word," murmured Harry as he and his chum made their way by a roundabout route, through thick weeds, to the shore, whence they hoped to be able to work around to the shack and dock of the surly lobsterman. "Something tossed off a vessel and found floating in the sea. Why, Bob, that could be bootleg stuff—contraband liquor put off some French or British vessel to be picked up by speed boats—by a seaplane, maybe, and brought ashore."

"It *could* be, yes," Bob admitted. "But, though I seem to be stubborn, Harry, I'm not going to admit that this *is* a rum-running game."

"Well, I'm saying it is. We'll see who's right."

"I'm willing," Bob murmured. "And now we'd better keep quiet. We're getting near that shack."

"Right!"

The boys had reached the shore of Shark River. The tide was high and they had to push their way through tangled bushes and weeds at the very edge of the water. Had the tide been out they could have gone along the sandy, pebbly beach. But they did not mind the discomfort, for

they felt that they were on their way to rescue Ned. Fate, chance, or what you will, had guided them to the spot where the more elaborate methods of detective deduction and reasoning might have failed. Though, as yet, they were not absolutely sure that Ned was in the shack.

"What'll we do if we meet that old codger before we get to the shack?" asked Harry in low tones when they had reached a place on the beach at the side of the rickety dock and almost in front of the equally rickety building where the surly lobsterman made his home.

"Why, just tell him we followed his directions and came around to his front door to get some lobsters and crabs," answered Bob.

"But he told us he wouldn't have any until tomorrow."

"Well, we can pretend this is tomorrow, or that we made a mistake or, best of all, we'll just have to rush him and get inside to rescue Ned," Bob decided.

"That last suits me best," Harry said. "I've still got my club."

"So have I! Now come on. There goes a light!"

A gleam came from the shack which the shadows of the night were quickly blotting out. And by the rays of a lantern, set aglow in the mysterious little cabin, the boys approached closer.

A flight of rattling steps led up from the beach,

at one side of the dock, and at a point where it was joined to a small porch, or verandah, if such it could be called. Treading softly, Bob and Harry crept up these steps. The front door was in the middle of the shack and there was a window on each side of it. Harry looked in, drew a deep breath and said in a low voice:

"I told you so, Bob. He's making home-brew! I don't believe Ned is here at all!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE RESCUE

BOB DEXTER, who had been standing a few feet back of his chum, stepped quickly, but silently, to the other window of the shack and peered within. He saw just what Harry saw and murmured:

"Well, you're right about that part of it! He *is* making some sort of home-brew!" For the surly lobsterman was watching something boiling on a stove in a big copper pot. Steam arose from it and above the pot was a coil of copper pipe leading into a large crock on the floor. It needed but a few deep breaths on the part of the boys to smell the pungent odor that came out of the cracks around the windows and doors.

"He's making contraband, sure as guns!" whispered Harry.

"But that doesn't say Ned isn't in there, and it hasn't in the least changed my opinion about what this game is!" declared Bob.

"Well, name it, then!"

"I can't exactly name it, though I can tell you what it isn't—and it *isn't* bootleg or rum-running."

"Well, what's that?" Harry indicated the ac-

tivities of the surly lobsterman in the shack, for the old codger was busy over the concoction he had boiling on his stove. So busy was he that he had, apparently neither seen nor heard the boys on his porch.

"Oh, I admit that this lobsterman is making a little illicit liquor for himself, and, perhaps, for some of his fishermen customers," Bob said in a low voice. "But you can't make me believe those fellows in that big car, or those in the seaplane, are linked up to any one horse racket like this. They're out for bigger game."

"But they stopped here and were going in the shack and Ned is a prisoner here."

"Yes, but those men used this old fellow for their own purposes—they aren't in the rum game with him. And we may find Ned in here or we may not. We'll soon know, however."

"How you going to find out?"

"Rush the place. Are you ready?"

"Sure!"

"Got your club?"

"Right here."

"Then get set!" advised Bob. "We'll put our shoulders to the door and crash in. That ought to be easy. This is a flimsy place. And if we take the old man by surprise we may get out of him what we want. Ready now, when I count three!"

Bob counted. Harry held himself tense and at the conclusion of the whispered numbering the

lads made a football rush at the door which was broken from the hinges and went down on the floor with a bang, narrowly missing the lobsterman who sprang out of the way with a cry of surprise followed by a begging voice.

"Git out of here! Git out!" he yelled. " 'Tain't right fer th' law t' stop me makin' suthin' t' cure a cold. Haulin' lobster pots is hard work—cold, dirty work. I got t' have suthin' t' take ——"

Then he recognized the two boys and his pleading turned to anger.

"So it's th' same two!" he cried. "I told ye t' keep away from here! An' now ye bust in on me! I—I ——"

He looked around as if for a weapon. His eyes glared banefully.

"Now cut it out!" ordered Bob sharply. "We aren't prohibition officers and we don't care what you're cooking there, though we can pretty nearly guess by the smell. We don't want you for that."

"Then what do ye want me fer?"

"We want our friend—a lad whom you have a prisoner here!" boldly demanded Bob. "Let him go at once or we'll raise such a row as you never heard and we'll bring the police here in jig time."

"Huh! Th' police of Belport won't bother me!" said the old codger with a grim chuckle. "Every lobsterman an' fisherman makes what he has t' take t' keep th' cold an' wet out. But as fer havin' anybody here a prisoner—bosh! I ain't

got nobody! I could 'a' told ye that this arternoon, only I thought ye was prohibition snoops! There's nobody here but me!"

"Isn't there? Then who's in that room, moaning and groaning?" asked Bob quickly. He pointed to a closed door back of the surly lobsterman. In the silence that had followed the old codger's declaration there was heard a noise behind that portal.

"That's my bedroom! There's nobody in there!"

"Tell that to some of your lobsters!" yelled Bob. "Come on, Harry! And *tackle low*!"

With that, Bob flung himself in a football rush on the old man, and was followed, an instant later, by Harry. They bore the fellow down so quickly and heavily that he was taken off guard.

"Let me alone, you! Hey, quit! Oh, my back! Git out!"

Thus yelled the surly lobsterman, but Bob and Harry were in no mood to show mercy. They pulled, hauled and pummeled the old fellow, taking care, however, not to roll against the stove in the struggle. Had it been upset, and the coals scattered, there would have been a more serious outcome to the fight.

As it was, the lobsterman was stunned, rolled into a corner and then Bob and Harry, stepping over his prostrate body, opened the inner door which wasn't locked. It was dark in there but in a few seconds the boys were able to make out that

it was a bedroom and on the bed, trussed and gagged, lay Ned Fuller.

"There he is!" cried Harry.

"Sure!" exclaimed Bob, joyfully. "We'll soon have you out of here, old man!" he went on as, with his knife, he quickly severed the ropes on Ned's wrists and ankles, as Harry removed the gag.

"Oh, fellows! I'm so glad you came!" gasped Ned. "It's been—been awful! My throat—water!" he gasped.

Harry went to the main room and, seeing a jug, smelled and tasted the contents.

"It's plain water all right," he said as he poured out a glass and took it in to Ned.

By this time the lobsterman had gotten to his feet. All the fight seemed gone out of him, for he was old and though tough from his years of seafaring life, he had been stunned by the fall after the football tackle.

"Look here, you two," he protested in a much different voice than that he had used before, "you can't take him away," and he pointed to Ned who was being led out to the main room by his chums.

"Why can't we?" asked Harry.

"You see we're doing it all right!" spoke Bob, grimly. "And you can thank your lucky lobster pots that we aren't staying to give you the beating up you deserve! So we can't take him away? Ha! Ha!"

"No—at least you *oughtn't* to," said the lob-

sterman more mildly. "Don't take him away."

"Why not?" asked Bob.

" 'Cause he's crazy!"

"*Crazy*?" chorused Bob and Harry. In surprise Ned looked up from another glass of water he was drinking.

"He escaped from the asylum an' his keepers are on their way t' git him," said the lobsterman, firmly. "Sure he's crazy. I don't mean he's violent, or anythin' like that. Anyhow, he didn't git no chance t' be fer they brought him t' me here all tied up an' so he couldn't speak."

"Who brought him here and who are you?" asked Bob, sternly.

"I'm Jed Bailey," was the answer. "Everybody in Belport knows me an' my lobster boat. I don't do nothin' wrong—leastwise no more'n' what everybody else does around here—make stuff t' keep from ketchin' cold in winter."

"Never mind about that part of it," said Bob, with a grim tightening of his mouth. "But who brought him here," and he pointed to Ned, who was chafing his wrists to restore the circulation halted by the tight cords. "Who brought him here?"

"Three men—said they was from th' asylum that he got away from," muttered Jed Bailey.

"That's right," Ned murmured. "There were three men, fellows. They came to the cottage, when you and Harry were away, Bob. Before I knew what their game was they jumped me, hit

me hard and, when I was almost knocked out, they gagged me, tied me up, carried me out to a big car and dropped me here. But when we were fighting I managed to pull a piece of a pasteboard box out from the table leg."

"I know," said Bob. "We found it. That gave us the clue—you were kidnapped all right!"

"Yes, I happened to see the word KID on the piece of box and I thought maybe you'd guess. For I knew you'd be worried when you got back and found I wasn't there. They kidnapped me —those three men."

"Kidnapped!" exclaimed Bailey, and his face showed his fear, for he seemed to know the penalty for this crime. "Why, them men never said a word about *kidnapping*. They said this young feller had got away from a *crazy asylum* an' they asked me t' let him stay here until they could send the keepers. Claimed he come of a good family an' his folks didn't want th' disgrace of any publicity so they weren't goin' t' let th' police know."

"And you believed such a nonsensical story as that?" asked Harry.

"How was I t' know?" whined Jed Bailey. "Besides, them fellers sort of smelled my—my stuff I make fer colds—an' they threatened t' tell th' prohibition men on me if I didn't let 'em leave this lad here. So what could I do? I never laid hands on him; did I, son?" he appealed to Ned.

"No, you didn't touch me, but you didn't do anything for me, either."

"I didn't dast! They said you was crazy."

"And I couldn't tell him anything different," Ned said. "I couldn't talk. But I managed to sort of groan and moan when I heard you two break in," he said. "I never heard a more joyful sound than when that door went down. I knew, then, that I'd be rescued."

"But who captured you?" asked Bob as Harry helped Ned rub his wrists.

"Three men—I don't know who they were. I never saw them before. It all happened so suddenly. And when I was left here, shut up in the dark, I didn't know what to think. I tried to wiggle loose but they knew how to tie knots."

"This was a dirty piece of work," declared Bob angrily, "and I'm not sure," he went on to Jed Bailey, "that you don't know more about it than you have told us! If you do ——"

"I hardly think he does, Bob," interposed Ned. "The men who brought me here talked to him as if they had never seen him before."

"They hadn't!" protested the lobsterman. "I never see 'em afore. An' I wouldn't 'a' had a thing t' do with it only I thought I was doin' somebody a favor by keepin' a crazy lad safe. Besides, I didn't want any prohibition fellers snoopin' around when I'm makin' my cold cure."

"Smells strong enough to cure almost anything," murmured Harry. "But are you able to navigate, Ned? Can you walk to the car?"

"Oh, sure! But I'm tired and thirsty and hun-

gry. Let's get back to our place and talk this over. I suppose I can go now; can't I?" he asked Jed Bailey with just the touch of sarcasm.

"Why, sure. If you're not crazy you got a right t' go. I'm sorry I kept ye here, but them men ——"

"Hark!" suddenly cautioned Bob. "Some one is coming!"

CHAPTER IX

TOGETHER AGAIN

WITH a sudden motion, Bob Dexter reached over and turned out the light. The interior of the lobster shack was at once plunged in darkness. Standing there in tense silence, the three chums waited for what was to happen next.

"What's th'——" began Bailey. But Bob hissed at him:

"Be quiet!"

Now they all heard the noise of oars clumsily handled, for they thumped on the boat gunwales. Then out of the exterior darkness came voices. One said:

"It ought to be around here!"

"Yes, I think 'tis!" agreed another.

"They're after us!" gasped Harry.

"Them's friends of mine—I know their voices," said Bailey in confident tones. "Ye needn't be afeerd. They're comin' t'—t' git some cold remedy."

"All right," announced Bob and he sensed that the lobsterman was telling the truth. "But don't let them in until we go out the back way."

"All right, I'll do that. George and Pete ain't

in no hurry, anyhow. They know I won't run away. But they may be wonderin' why I don't show a light."

"You can show it in a little while," Bob assured him. "We want to slip out, first. And another thing, Mr. Bailey!"

"What's that?"

"If those men who brought our chum here with a silly yarn about him escaping from an asylum—if they come back—you don't know how he got away. Understand?"

"But I *do* know how he got away—ye rushed me an' took him!"

"Don't you tell those men that!" warned Bob. "If you do you'll find yourself in more trouble than you'll like. Just say you don't know. Or, if they come, you can be away from home. That will keep them guessing. They'll likely break in to find out but they won't find Ned. Be away from home all day tomorrow—that's the safest way."

"Happens I kin do that fer I got t' go out t' sea quite a ways an' raise my lobster pots," Jed Bailey said. "All right, I'm willin'. As I said, I didn't know I was doin' wrong."

"Maybe not," agreed Bob. "Well, we're going out the back door. Wait a little after we're gone before you show a light or hail your friends—if they *are* your friends," he added, significantly.

"Oh, I *know* 'em all right!" Bailed protested. "But I'll do as you say."

As Bob, Ned and Harry slipped out of the back door of the shack and hurried along the winding, weed-grown path, they heard from the river in front the husky hail of men obviously natives of Belport.

"Ahoy there, Jed! Show a light!" some one called.

"We're here!" added his companion.

"Can't mistake that drawl," commented Harry. "They're off the same piece of goods as Bailey himself."

"I guess so," Bob agreed. "Well, Ned, you had quite a time of it; didn't you?"

"I'll say I did—a rough time. I thought I'd never see you boys again. How'd you find me?"

"Bob's a detective—I thought you knew," said Harry with a chuckling laugh.

"Oh, cut it out!" Bob advised. "It was as much good luck as good management," he went on. "If it hadn't been for that kidnapping clue you gave us in the pasteboard, though, Ned, we might not have found you so soon."

"Well, fellows, I'm glad you did. I had a rotten time while it lasted."

By turns Harry and Bob told their end of the story and, while riding back with his chums, to whom he had been so happily reunited, Ned told his version of the affair.

"I was sitting in the shack," he said and by shack he meant their own rented cottage, "waiting for you fellows to come back from the store.

I guess I sort of dozed off, for I was reading and it was warm, and, the first I knew three men were in the place."

"What sort of men?" asked Bob.

"Well, one was well dressed—spoke with somewhat of a foreign accent—German I took it to be—but maybe it was Dutch, or Swedish," and Ned described one of the two men who had alighted from the big car at the back path to the lobster hut.

"We saw him!" cried Harry.

"You did?" cried Ned in surprise.

"I mean after he had done the dirty work on you," Bob explained. He detailed the circumstance which had been passed over rather hurriedly in the former joint recital by him and Harry. "But who were the other two, Ned?"

"They looked like sailors or motor boat mechanics. The well-dressed German—I might as well call him that until we find out what he is—made some inquiries about parties I never heard of," went on Ned. "I took it that they were autoists who were looking for friends around here, but I couldn't help 'em any. Then they asked if I was all alone in the shack, and right away I suspected something was up.

"But before I could answer, or jump out of the way, those two sailor, or mechanic, chaps were on top of me and we had a hard tussle. I needn't say they were too much for me, and after I found the battle was going against me I happened to

see that piece of pasteboard with KID on it and when I was down on the floor, wrestling with them, I pulled it out. Guess I got some blood on it—my nose leaked a little," he said, tenderly feeling of it.

"Yes, we saw the spots," Harry remarked.

"And we could see there had been a fight," added Bob. "But what happened after they got the best of you?"

"I don't know, exactly. Guess I sort of passed out cold—I got some nasty cracks on the head. But when I came around I found I was in a big car, speeding up along the river. I was bound and gagged so I couldn't move or make a sound and I was lying on the floor in the back of the car so nobody could see me. Then they carried me in there and I've been there ever since—until you came."

"Dirty work!" muttered Harry.

"But what does it mean?" asked Ned.

"Rum-runners!" muttered Harry.

"Oh, say, give that a rest; will you?" begged Bob with a laugh. "Every time we did anything, after we started out to find you, Ned, it had a rum-running or bootleg angle to it, according to Harry."

"Well, that old lobsterman who was my keeper was certainly boiling home-brew," Ned stated with a laugh. "It smelled enough to make me dizzy even in the back room."

"Yes, it was pretty thick," Bob said. "And

I'm willing to admit that Bailey is making stuff on the side, like lots of others. That doesn't say it's right, and of course we fellows never go in for that sort of thing, anyhow. It's awful, rotten stuff. But I claim, and Harry doesn't quite agree with me, that this whole business is something bigger than rum-running or bootlegging."

"That's big business—for some," Harry said.

"Maybe. But I'm sure, when we get to the bottom of this mystery," went on Bob, "that it will turn out to be something else. You'll see."

"Did the fellows that left you in the lobster shack really tell Jed Bailey you were crazy?" asked Harry as they neared their own cottage, having made a quick run down the Shark River road.

"They sure did, and I was in no position to correct 'em. And I guess I must have looked and acted crazy. I'm a sight now, as it is—all dirt and blood and roughed over. Fierce!"

"We'll fix you up," murmured Harry.

"Sure!" echoed Bob. "They're bold rascals, these, and it's a dangerous game they're playing —kidnapping! I wonder what it will be next?"

"They may come after us," said Harry with a laugh that was not altogether easy.

"That's so!" exclaimed Ned. "Evidently they came to get all three of us, but they only found me. You'll be next, fellows!"

"There isn't going to be any next time," said Bob, grimly.

"What do you mean?" asked Harry.

"Are you going to skip out from here?" Ned wanted to know.

"Not on your life! I wouldn't let those fellows know they had us beaten before we started to fight. I'm going to stick right here!"

"So am I!" echoed Ned.

"And I!" came with determination from Harry. "But how are you going to stop 'em from making another raid on us, when we don't expect it? They're fierce fighters—Ned's condition shows that," and as they were now in the cottage, with the lights glowing, poor Ned's plight was plainly visible.

"They certainly rough-housed me!" Ned murmured with a rueful smile.

"What we're going to do next time," said Bob, grimly, "is to be prepared for those chaps. They may come with a bigger gang but we'll have to arm ourselves—or do something to stand 'em off. One thing I'm not going to do is to run away!"

"I should say not!" chorused Ned and Harry.

"And I'm going to get at the bottom of this mystery," went on the young detective. "We seem to have plopped into it without warning. But now we are in, I'm not going to quit until I find out what it all means."

"That's the way to talk!" cried Harry.

"And I'll do some talking after I get a wash and have something to eat," said Ned. "I'm starved."

"Go up and wash—change your clothes and

I'll get grub," offered Bob. "I'm getting hungry."

"Shall I call up the police?" asked Harry, going to the telephone, for the cottage, though supposed to be a camp, had this convenience.

"No! Don't!" objected Bob.

"Why not?" asked Ned. "I've had a hard time of it, and I want revenge!"

"You're entitled to it!" declared Harry.

"And you'll get it!" promised Bob. "But let's do it ourselves and leave the police out of it. For the matter of that, old Bailey stands in with whatever police force they have here. It's just as well to go on our own. I'll get at the bottom of this mystery yet!"

"That's the way to talk!" cried Harry.

"All right, leave it to old sleuth!" chuckled Ned, who, now that all three were together again, felt much better. "Leave it to Bob!"

"Suits me!" came from Harry.

"And when you get washed, Ned, and have a bite to eat, which I'll see that you get, I want to ask you some questions," Bob said as he went out to the kitchen.

"I'll tell you anything I know," Ned promised. "But that isn't much—if you mean about what happened to me. I've spilled it all."

"Maybe," Bob said. "Well, hop to the bath tub and ——"

He paused, for a knock sounded on the door and the three chums gazed apprehensively at one another.

CHAPTER X

THE MOTOR BOAT

SILENCE, which followed that startling knock, seemed to fill the small cottage to overflowing. Silent it was without, also, and dark. Bob looked toward the electric light switch on the wall, but to reach it he would have had to pass in front of a window, and his form would have been cast in a black, shadowy outline on the white curtain.

Ned, on his way up stairs, was equally unable to reach the switch without making himself liable to observation, and Harry could not get to it without also casting a tell-tale shadow.

Again the knock sounded, and then Ned hoarsely whispered:

"Aren't either of you fellows going to see who it is?"

Harry shrugged his shoulders hopelessly, and Bob was about to say something when a voice from without demanded:

"I say in there! Anybody home?"

The relief which followed let the boys down from a tense height to the level of unapprehensiveness so suddenly that they felt quite limp. It was not that they recognized the voice, but the

tones of it were so genial and natural that it would have been a very suspicious person, indeed, who would associate those tones with anything sinister.

"Hadn't you better see who it is, Bob?" suggested Ned.

"I was thinking," Bob began, "that it might be some of those fellows who caught Ned."

"I was thinking the same thing myself," Harry remarked.

"So was I," added Ned. "But those crooks didn't have voices like this one. Open the door, Bob!"

"I say—hope I'm not troubling you in there," continued the voice of the unseen one in the outer darkness. "But I can hear you talking and while I don't want to butt in, I'd be awfully obliged if you could tell me where I am!"

"It's somebody lost—on the wrong road!" exclaimed Harry.

"Sounds like it," admitted Ned.

This last explanation of the knock decided Bob. He strode to the door and opened it. In the flood of cheerful light which streamed out of the cottage there stood revealed on the small, front porch, a young fellow about the age of either of the lads who confronted him.

"Sorry to trouble you," the stranger went on, "but I don't know my way around here and it's so jolly dark, and such few houses and most of them without lights, that I didn't know what to

do until I saw your glims. Do you mind telling me if this is the road to Homedell?"

"It is," Bob answered, for when he and his chums were out riding the first day they had come to Belport, he remembered having seen a sign-post with the name of that town on it. "Keep on west and take the third road on your right," added the young detective.

"Thanks!" exclaimed the lost youth. "But it's so very dark I don't know the west from the east, or, for that matter, from the north or south. I'm all turned around," and he laughed as if it were a good joke.

"Which way are you headed?" asked Bob as his two chums, their suspicions all gone, gathered back of him.

"That way," and the youth, standing on the porch and facing Bob, pointed with his left hand.

"Well, that way is east, this shack of ours faces the south," Bob explained, while Harry chimed in to ask:

"Are you walking? I don't mean this present moment," he hastily added, for he saw he had laid himself open to a humorous comeback from the caller, and he certainly looked good-natured, as if he often made jokes.

"No, I have a flivver," was the answer. "I drove in from Point Pleasant early this evening. I don't know much about this part of the country but I'm on my way to visit an uncle of mine who lives in Homedell. I inquired my way as far as

here—this is still Belport; isn't it?" he asked.

"Unless they've renamed it since morning," Bob said with a laugh.

"Well, I guess they haven't so I'm right that far. I was told to go through Belport and I tried to do it. But after I struck this shore road, and it got dark, and houses started getting as scarce as hens' teeth, I didn't know whether I was right or not. I didn't want to go too far out of my way and when I saw your light, after passing a lot of shacks that were as dark as coal bins, I decided to ask you. Hope I didn't disturb you or anything like that. I say, though, something seems to have happened," he said, quickly, as he caught sight of Ned, who was cut, bruised and tousled.

"Had a little accident," Ned explained. "Nothing of any account."

"Well, I'm glad of that. But thanks for the information. I guess I can find my way now. You said the third road on my right, keeping straight along this one to the west?" he asked Bob.

"That's right. Just before you get to the third turn, which you are to take, you'll cross a white bridge."

"That's a good landmark to remember. I'm much obliged. Hope I can do you a favor some day. So long!"

"So long!" echoed the trio.

Bob held the door open long enough so that the other lad could see his way down the lighted path to the road, and then gave his chums a cau-

tionary signal by putting a finger across his lips and slipped outside, closing the door softly after him.

Ned and Harry looked at each other in surprise.

"What's he doing that for?" Ned inquired.

"Guess he wants to check up on what that lad said," remarked Harry. "His story might be true and again ——"

"I see. Bob isn't taking any chances."

They waited several seconds, rather apprehensively it must be admitted, and then out of the silence and darkness came the unmistakable chug, splutter and finally the continuous throb of a flivver's motor.

"There he goes!" exclaimed Ned.

"Hope he hasn't taken Bob with him," Harry murmured.

"How could he take Bob?" Ned wanted to know. "Bob's bigger than this lad."

"He might have had others with him. But I guess ——"

Further surmise and apprehension were needless, however, for at that moment the door opened and Bob came back in.

"All right?" asked Harry.

"All right," Bob answered. "I just wanted to see if he was telling a straight story, so I trailed out after him."

"And was he?"

"As far as I could check up. He had a car and

he was all alone in it and he was headed west and went off that way."

"Then I guess he's all right," observed Harry.

"Seems so," Bob admitted.

"Then I'm going to get a bath," spoke Ned, rather wearily, "and I expect to find something to eat waiting for me when I come down," he added with a whimsical, stern manner.

"You'll find it!" promised Bob.

While Harry was helping him to get the meal ready, the two talked over what had happened during that rather hectic day.

"When that knock sounded," Harry remarked, "I sure thought it was some of those rum-runners after us."

"Eliminating the word rum-runners," commented Bob, "I thought the same thing."

"And, oh, boy, how glad I was when I found they weren't there!" went on Harry.

"Well," remarked Bob, as the sound of Ned's feet descending the stairs could be heard, "I'd like to catch those scoundrels and I am going to have a go in that direction. But I'll be just as glad if they don't bother us any more tonight."

"And how!" echoed Ned as, washed and refreshed, he sank into a chair, for the table had been set and Bob's meal was ready. "I crave food and plenty of it!" concluded the lad who had been so mysteriously held a prisoner.

"Help yourself!" Harry invited and the meal went on merrily, with many questions being fired

like a battle barrage at Ned between bites.

"I'm afraid I can't give you any more clues, Bob," Ned said at length, following several pointed questions. "I didn't get a very good look at the men, but from their voices I should judge them to be foreigners. They spoke good English, but with a slight accent. And as for the game they are playing, I couldn't even guess at it from anything they said."

"Have you any theories?" asked Harry.

"No, don't try to form any!" hastily interrupted Bob. "I mean," he went on to explain, "if you start trying to formulate a theory you'll start trying to fit the known facts to it instead of making a theory to fit the facts. And that's what we've got to do if we are to get at the bottom of this mystery."

"All right, then I'll lay off," Ned said, helping himself to more baked beans. "But, as a matter of fact, I can't even guess what those fellows are up to."

"I can't, either, unless it's rum ——" began Harry but he was cut short by Bob who playfully raised the water pitcher and muttered through clenched teeth:

"Don't you dare say it again! Don't you *dare*!"

"Have your own way!" chuckled Harry.

"If I might be so bold as to ask a question," remarked Ned with a smile, "does our honorable detective think the lad who was just here, inquiring his way to Homedell, has any connection with

the men who kidnapped me?"

"It's possible," Bob admitted.

"Then for cats' sake why didn't you grab him?" demanded Harry.

"But not very probable," Bob added. "He looked like a clean-cut, decent young chap, like ——"

"Ourselves!" cut in Ned.

"Well put!" murmured Harry.

"Well, I grant that," proceeded Bob. "But, as I was saying, he didn't have the look of one who would be involved with as desperate men as I believe this gang to be. Then, too, if he had any designs on us, or if he was one of those rats who got Ned, he wouldn't have come here alone. And that's why I slipped out after him to take a look in his car. He was alone."

"He might have been a spy, though," suggested Harry. "I mean they may have sent him here to look us over—to see if we three were together again."

"And, seeing us here, he may pass the word back and they may raid us in the night," exclaimed Ned. "Fellows, I don't like this!"

"Don't get excited," Bob advised. "I thought of that spy business, and it's possible, though not very probable. When those fellows find out Ned isn't their prisoner any longer, and if Bailey doesn't give us away, I think they'll be so worried over his escape that they'll give us a wide berth—at least for a time."

"All the same," suggested Ned, "it wouldn't be a bad idea to keep watch for a couple of nights —I mean take turns at it," he said.

"Not a half bad idea," Bob agreed.

"But I suggest," came from Harry, "in view of what Ned has been through today, that he be let off from standing guard tonight. Bob and I will do the trick between us."

"Not on your life!" objected Ned. "I'm all right, now I've had a feed. I'll stand my proper watch."

"No," said Bob, "you'll get a night's sleep. There may be a lot to do tomorrow and we'll want one fresh member of the detective crew."

"He does us honor—calling us detectives!" chuckled Harry.

"You'll do as much toward solving this mystery as I will," Bob predicted.

"No," stated Ned, "we haven't quite got your knack of it, Bob. But if you insist that I hit the hay I'm agreeable. I am sort of played out, and I'll do a double trick tomorrow or next night."

"Then get up to bed!" commanded Bob. "Harry and I will divide the night watches."

So it was arranged. But if the boys expected an attack or even an alarm, they were disappointed, for the night passed quietly and Ned slept through it all undisturbed.

"Well, what's on the bill of fare for today?" Harry asked as they met for rather a late breakfast. "I don't mean to eat," he went on. "But

about getting at the bottom of this mystery. What's on, Bob?"

"I think we might sort of cruise about a bit—I mean in our car. Go down to the inlet, do a bit of fishing and keep our ears open for anything we might hear and our eyes open for anything we might see—I mean that can be fitted to this mystery. And we might ask a few questions."

"I move to amend that by making it *guarded* questions," came from Ned with a chuckle.

"Amendment accepted," said Bob. "And you're right. We don't want to give our own show away."

So they cruised about in the car, spending an hour or two fishing at the inlet and pier with many other natives and summer visitors. But the fish were not biting well, and, as the sport was only a side line, so to speak, with the trip, and as they had not the patience of veteran fishermen, they soon came away.

"Let's ride up and take a look at Bailey's lobster shack," Ned proposed. "I didn't get a good view of it."

"Shouldn't think you'd want to see it again," Harry said.

"I don't—not the inside, anyhow."

"Yes, let's go up," agreed Bob. And they did.

Having now, as Harry said, "gotten that lobsterman's number," they did not hesitate to go boldly up to the shack. But Bailey wasn't there, nor was anyone. And the absence of his motor

dory from the dock in front of his shack was evidence enough that he was out at sea lifting his lobster pots.

"Nothing doing!" remarked Bob in rather disappointed tones as they went back to their car.

"Oh, well, better luck tomorrow," suggested Ned.

But neither that day nor the next did they discover any clues. And on the third day Bob said he was going down to the village after some supplies. He went alone in the car, for Harry and Ned said they wanted to rest.

It was later in the afternoon, when Harry and Ned were sitting down on the beach of Shark River, back of their cottage, that they heard the putt-putt of a motor boat and saw it approaching the small dock where their rowboat was made fast. Some one in the motor craft was waving to the two on shore and after a close scrutiny Ned cried:

"Why it's Bob!"

"But what's he doing in that motor boat?" asked Harry. "Ned, we'd better watch out. This may be a trick!"

CHAPTER XI

A NIGHT VIGIL

HARRY and Ned had started to walk across the narrow, sandy and pebbly beach along this stretch of Shark River, down to the edge of the water, to meet the oncoming motor boat, in the stern of which stood Bob Dexter. But when Harry spoke his warning, both boys halted at some distance away from the small dock, toward which the spluttering craft was now headed.

"What do you mean—trick?" asked Ned. "That's Bob in the boat; isn't it?"

"Yes, that's Bob all right, but still it may be a trick!"

"How can it be, with him standing up there in plain sight and waving to us?"

"Suppose some of those crooks have captured Bob, put him aboard this boat and are covering him with guns, from the shelter of the trunk cabin there?" asked Harry. For the motor boat was fitted with a trunk cabin forward, raised from the deck and pierced with portholes.

"You mean they may be forcing him to stand up there and steer and wave at us?" asked Ned in a low voice.

"That's it, yes. Isn't it possible?"

"It is, but a bit far-fetched, I'd say. What do you think the game is, providing Bob is a prisoner and is being forced, under the threat of guns, to stand up like that?" Ned asked.

"They want to capture us, of course!" Harry answered. "They want to nab all three of us, for some reason. I don't like it, Ned. I think we'd better skip back to the cottage."

He was about to put this suggestion into effect, and Ned had more than half a mind to follow him when Bob hailed them from the boat:

"What's the matter with you fellows? Do you think I'm a ghost or the Ancient Mariner? Come on down to the dock and look this ship over!"

Ned and Harry hesitated but a moment longer. Then Bob laughed in his characteristic way and the doubts of the two vanished. No one, under the threatened compulsion of weapons in the hands of unseen ones concealed in the cabin, could laugh in that care-free way.

"Come on!" cried Ned. "It's all right!"

"I guess it is," agreed Harry. "But where did he get that boat?"

Bob steered the craft to the side of the dock, which was hardly as large as the boat, tossed a line for his chums to catch and then pulled a switch which stopped the motor, having previously thrown the propeller out of gear and spun it in reverse to check the boat's way.

"Well, what do you think of this?" Bob de-

manded when he had made the stern line fast, which like service at the bow was performed by his chums. "Pretty slick; eh?"

"Nice little tub," remarked Ned, looking it over.

"Where'd you get it? Find it abandoned and asking to be taken home?" Harry wanted to know.

"Fellows, I hired this boat," Bob answered.

"Hired it?" chorused Ned and Harry.

"Yes. By the authority vested in me as treasurer of this organization, I took some of the money and hired this boat for a week, two weeks or, I'll go so far as to say, three weeks."

"Say, that's great!" exclaimed Ned. "I've been wishing we had a motor boat down here, and now we've got one."

"It's a good idea," agreed Harry. "Your expenditure is hereby sanctioned."

"Second the motion," murmured Ned.

"Did you get it to go fishing in?" Harry asked. "I guess we could put out to sea in this ship, if it wasn't too rough and if she's got a good engine," he went on as he got aboard, followed by Ned, while Bob also followed.

"Oh, she's got a dandy engine," the young detective declared. "Not extra speedy but powerful and dependable. Yes, we could go out to sea in this if it wasn't too rough. Her bow's high enough, the engine is well hatched in and the cabin is ordinary-storm proof. That's what I got her

for—she'll be the cheese to go out to sea."

"Fishing?" asked Harry again.

"Well, fishing of a sort," Bob replied. "But we'd have better luck at regular fishing down in Barnegat or Sandy Hook Bays than out in the open ocean here, I guess," he added. "Too many pound nets around here. But the principal kind of fishing I hope to do hasn't anything to do with poles, hooks, lines and bait."

"What then?" asked Ned.

"Fellows," went on Bob and his air was rather serious, "I hope in this boat that we can make a better trail after those men."

"You mean the ones who got me?" asked Ned.

"And the same ones, I suspect, who landed in the mysterious seaplane when I caught the big bass," Bob answered. "Fellows, I believe this puzzle we're trying to solve has more to do with the sea than the land, and we need a boat to keep on the trail. I've been thinking about this for some time, but I didn't want to say anything about it for fear I couldn't hire the right kind of a boat.

"Today I slipped off by myself down to the inlet. I heard about some fishing boats and pleasure boats there to hire. Most of them weren't any good, or the owners wanted a small fortune for the use of the boat for any extended period. At last, though, I struck the fellow who owns this *Dolphin* and made a bargain with him. He has been taking parties out on day and night excursions, but he's sick and has to give up. So it

worked out all right and we have this boat for as long as we care to pay for it, and the cost isn't much."

"This is the berries!" exclaimed Harry as he went in the cabin, noting the neat bunks and a sort of galley, or kitchen, where cooking could be done on a gasolene stove. The *Dolphin* "slept four," and with the three chums aboard there would be no crowding.

"Why, it's got a regular pantry, sink and all," observed Ned.

"Yes, it was built for cruising in inland waters," Bob explained, "but the original owners sold it and the fellow I hired it from used it only for day trips, so he didn't bother with food."

"But we're going to!" exclaimed Ned. "Why, we can go off for a week at a time if we want to, up the Shrewsbury, around Raritan Bay—anywhere we like."

"We're going to stick mostly around here," said Bob. "That is until we get to the bottom of the queer doings. After that we can go cruising as far as we like."

"That suits me!" observed Ned.

"Sure!" chimed in Harry. "But could we take her out now and try her, Bob?"

"Sure. She's as much your boat as she is mine, and while I seemed to insist on hanging around here until we get on the track of those birds in the seaplane, if you fellows vote against it ——"

"No, we're with you on that!" cried Ned. "I

want my revenge! I think I'm entitled to it."

"Sure!" agreed Harry.

The trio boarded the *Dolphin* and after Bob had explained the working of the motor to his chums, they took turns in running the craft around Shark River which was more like a bay than a stream. It was very shallow in places, though, and a channel had to be followed or a boat of the draft of the *Dolphin* would have gone aground on a sand bar. As it was, they narrowly missed one when Ned was steering.

"Well, how do you like her?" asked Bob as they put about to go back to the dock near their cottage.

"A peach!" declared Ned.

"All to the mustard!" was Harry's opinion. "We'll go out again after supper."

"It's a bit risky scooting around Shark River after dark," said Bob. "None of us know the channel any too well and the tide is running out. We can go down to the inlet, though. There's always plenty of water there at any stage of the tide."

"That suits me," said Harry and Ned agreed.

"And," went on Bob, "we might happen to get another look at that seaplane."

"Anchor the *Dolphin* half way down the inlet and watch," suggested Ned.

"A good idea," declared the young detective.

They took some sandwiches along and hot coffee in a thermos bottle, starting away from their

dock as dusk settled over Shark River. There were several merry parties in other motor boats cruising up and down the inlet, and from some craft came the strumming of banjos and the singing of mingled voices of girls and boys.

Coming, later in the evening, to a place about opposite where they had stretched on the sand the night they had observed the seaplane, Bob cast anchor and the boys eased themselves for a vigil. They hoped that the mysterious craft of the air would again settle down in the water.

The night wore on. The gay parties chugged away in their motor craft and, save for an occasional lobsterman coming in late, no boats passed up the inlet.

"Let's eat!" proposed Ned after a while, and they took out the lunch they had brought. That served to pass a half hour, and then time began to lag. Harry was about to propose that they either turn in on the bunks aboard or go back to the cottage when Bob exclaimed:

"Listen! I hear an airplane!"

"So do I!" said Ned.

With tense nerves they waited.

CHAPTER XII

THE SEAPLANE AGAIN

THROBBING in the night, which was starless and black, some craft of the air was passing along the heavens above the *Dolphin*. Bob and his chums, having caught the unmistakable hum and roar of powerful motors, had come from the cosy cabin to the open space at the stern and were looking up. It was long past midnight now and the inlet was deserted save for the anchored motor boat.

"Flying without lights," observed Ned as he caught the direction of the sound, but could see nothing.

"Doesn't really need 'em," said Bob. "The air isn't quite so crowded, yet, with planes as the earth is with autos. Though I suppose the time may come when an aerial cop will give you a summons for running your airplane without lanterns."

"That will be queer!" chuckled Harry. "But what sort of a bird is that up there, anyhow?"

"No telling," came from Bob. "He isn't going to land here on this trip, anyhow," he went on. "He's over and past us now!"

This was plain to the others as they heard the sound of the motors high up and judged the location of the airship from the vibration.

"It might be the seaplane and they might be going to come down in the Shrewsbury," observed Ned.

"In that case we're out of luck," Bob said.

"There isn't any way of telling whether that's a seaplane or an airplane; is there?" asked Harry.

"No way that I know of, in the dark, unless you can shoot up a searchlight beam, and we aren't equipped for that," Bob said. "The motors of both craft sound about alike, though an expert might be able to tell the difference. I can't. This may be just a land plane from Sea Girt circling around to give some new pilot an experience at night-flying. And, again, it might be our friends, the enemy, in the seaplane. There's no telling."

"Then I vote we either turn in aboard here or go back to the cottage to bed," came from Ned with a yawn. "I'm getting tired."

"So am I," chimed in Harry.

"Don't blame you," Bob assented. "I'm of the same opinion. We'll wait a little longer and if that bird doesn't come down we'll know it either isn't the outfit we're waiting for or that they are suspicious and won't drop down."

They remained out in the stern, looking up and trying to pierce the blackness that hid the heavens from them, but all to no purpose. The throbbing of the motors died away and did not come back.

"Just a night bird of passage," remarked Bob as he started the engine of the *Dolphin*, while Ned and Harry hauled up the anchor.

They were soon back at the dock in front of the cottage. It was a soft, summer night, very dark and with the promise of rain to come. The *Dolphin* was made fast and as Harry and Ned started up the dock toward shore Bob lingered a moment.

"What's the matter?" asked Harry, turning around.

"I was just thinking," Bob answered, "that there isn't any way of locking this craft here. We could run a chain through the bow ring bolt and through another ring bolt here on the dock, and fasten on a padlock if we had one. But we haven't. And, even if we had, somebody could cut the chain or smash the lock in the night."

"Who'd do such a thing as that?" asked Ned.

"The fellows who kidnapped you wouldn't stop at a little thing like that," Bob answered. "I don't like to leave this boat unprotected during the night, while we're asleep. And I don't feel like standing watch. If we could securely lock it in some way I'd do it."

"What's the matter with taking the rotating arm off the distributor?" asked Ned. "This motor is like one in an auto, only geared differently. Once I lost the key to our car and when I had to park it I just lifted the hood, took off the cover of the distributor dingus, lifted off the

revolving arm and unless a thief had a duplicate arm, which isn't likely, my car was as safe as if it had been sung to sleep."

"That's a good idea!" Bob said. "I'll take that distributor arm off. It's only one chance in a million that any thieves would have a duplicate."

It was the work of only a few minutes to temporarily disable the *Dolphin*, so that, short of towing her away, the craft could not be stolen. And the boys thought the noise, if such an attempt were made, would arouse them as the cottage was not far from the water.

So, somewhat excited, and not a little disappointed by the outcome of their night's adventure, they went to bed.

It was Bob who awakened, or, rather, was aroused from his slumber in the early hours of the morning, before dawn had yet tinted the eastern sky pink and gray. And the cause of his awakening was a noise down at the dock. His room was on that side of the house, the beds of Ned and Harry being on the other side.

Instantly Bob was alert, sitting up in bed, and, as the noise at the dock continued he sprang out of bed and, as he ran to the window, he shouted:

"Ned! Harry! They're here! Trying to steal the motor boat!"

Ned awakened first at the hail, joining his chum on the water side of the cottage and peering, with Bob, down at the dock. It was shrouded in dark-

ness but there were unmistakable sounds of a boat bumping against the little pier.

"Hello down there! Who are you? What are you doing?" yelled Bob.

"If we only had a searchlight!" murmured Ned.

Harry came running into Bob's room, something in his hand. He heard Ned's wish and exclaimed:

"Here you are! I bought this in the village yesterday." It was a flashlight of extra large size, the kind used by police and firemen and it had a focusing beam so that it was, in effect, a small searchlight.

In an instant Harry had the brilliant pencil of light flashing down toward the end of the pier, as Bob yelled again:

"Get away from that boat! Who are you, anyhow?"

"I'm not doin' anythin' t' yer boat!" came the answer in gruff tones. "I got a boat of me own! I'm jest leavin' ye a few lobsters in a bag on th' end of yer dock here! Thought ye might like 'em, bein' as how ye pestered me fer some, days back."

"It's Jed Bailey!" exclaimed Ned.

"That's me!" was the answer. "I went out t' lift my pots but my engine took a fit an' I couldn't git th' old machine goin' fer a long time. That's why I'm so late. But I want t' sort of make up fer what I done t' one of you boys so I'm leavin' ye some lobsters."

"Good for you! Thanks!" said Bob.

"Guess ye took me fer a thief; didn't ye?" asked the old man as he thumped a bag down on the dock.

"Sort of," admitted Bob.

"I didn't know ye had a boat," Jed Bailey went on. "I thought I'd mistook th' dock when I edge up t' it, but when I see th' old Newman cottage ye're in I knowed I was right."

"We just hired the boat," explained Ned.

"I reckon so," was the lobsterman's reply. "Well, g' night!"

"Good night!" echoed the boys and they went back to bed.

For several days after that they cruised around (meanwhile having a fine lobster feast) but they saw no signs of the mysterious seaplane nor did their guarded inquiries lead anywhere. They even went as far as Sandy Hook Bay and up the Shrewsbury River seeking the mysterious craft, but could get no clues.

Several more night vigils resulted in nothing and even Bob was on the verge of giving up the quest when the unexpected happened.

They were coming up the inlet one afternoon when a roaring in the air above their heads attracted their attention.

"It's the seaplane!" cried Ned.

"It's a seaplane," corrected Bob, stressing the article. "But whether it's the one we want is a question."

"We'll soon know," spoke Harry. "She's going to come down just about here!"

Eagerly the three on the *Dolphin* watched and waited.

"Seems to be heading right for us," remarked Ned.

"Oh, they won't bump us!" said Bob. "The fellow piloting that boat knows his business."

The seaplane, for such it was, came on steadily, heading in from the ocean. The craft was coming lower and lower on a long slant and it was evident that the pilot intended to set her down on the water of the inlet. There was plenty of room for even a long taxi ride in bringing the craft to a stop.

"Swing over a bit out of the way, Bob," urged Ned as he saw where the seaplane was about to drop. "No use having them see us—provided the same men are on board who are looking for us."

"Right!" Bob agreed and he put the *Dolphin* over toward the jetty.

CHAPTER XIII

AT CLOSE RANGE

FROM what was, virtually, a point of vantage and, at the same time a place to hide, Bob and his chums, aboard the *Dolphin* watched the mysterious seaplane drop down to the water, taxi along a short distance amid the waves and swells she created, and then come to anchor on the other side of the wide inlet, but not near enough the opposite jetty to permit curious ones to come too close. Where Bob had placed the motor boat was a point of vantage because he and his chums had a good view of the aircraft in which they were so interested. And they were also in good concealment, for the *Dolphin* was nested between two other boats like herself, and there were a number of smaller craft in which there were fishermen.

"Well, there they are!" remarked Ned, with a hint of vindictiveness in his voice. "I'd like to get at 'em!"

"That's the bird all right," agreed Harry. "Those fellows are bold; landing here in daylight."

"Maybe you two are right, but there's no cer-

tainty of it," came from Bob. "Think it over!"

"What do you mean?" asked Ned. "Aren't those the fellows we're after?"

"They may be." Bob's voice was cool in contrast to Ned's rather excited one.

"And isn't that the seaplane?" demanded Harry.

"It's a seaplane right enough," Bob admitted. "And certainly there is a pilot, and maybe some of his friends on board, unless that craft was run in under distant wireless control, which is possible but not very probable. But that doesn't prove it's either the plane or the men we are interested in."

"Well, maybe you're right," admitted Harry.

"Come to think of it, probably it can't be the plane we want," argued Ned, suddenly switching his views.

"Why not?" asked Bob with a smile.

"Well, if those fellows aboard her," and Ned pointed to the plane which was now anchored and floating idly on the water, "if those fellows aboard her are some kind of crooks, like those who kidnapped me, they wouldn't dare land here in daylight as boldly as they did."

"There's where you may be wrong," said Bob with a laugh. "The very boldness of their act might disarm suspicion. It's a game big crooks often play, and small ones, too. You've heard about the thief who went into a court room, during a trial, put a step ladder up behind the bench

of the judge and took the clock off the wall. Everybody thought he was sent to get the clock to repair it. The very boldness of that thief did away with suspicion."

"He had nerve!" commented Harry.

"I'll say!" echoed Ned.

"And that's what these fellows may have," went on Bob, nodding toward the seaplane. "If they are crooks, they know the way to bring on a chase is to appear afraid of being seen. The bold thief, who has his loot in his pocket, walks right past a policeman and may even ask him the time. A timid thief, self-conscious of his guilt, will run at the sight of an officer and so invite pursuance."

"Say, you ought to give lectures," commented Harry.

"Cut out the wise cracks!" warned Ned. "This is business! If you went through what I did you'd be glad enough to have Bob, or anybody else, tell you how to get even."

"I didn't mean anything," Harry apologized. "I wasn't making fun of Bob. I know he's better able than we are to figure this thing out. The Jint San proved that. I wasn't ——"

"That's enough," Bob broke in, clapping his chum in a friendly way on the back. "I know you didn't mean anything, Harry. And I guess I did get spouting a bit. But it's true about a bold criminal daring to do things another wouldn't and getting away with it."

"Sure!" chimed in Ned.

"I believe you!" echoed Harry. "And now what's the best thing to do about these fellows?"

"First we've got to find out if they are the ones we suspect," Bob suggested.

"Right!" assented his chums. They were letting him take the lead now, as he had often done before in solving these mysteries.

"And if they are—that is if Ned can recognize them, by their voices, or otherwise, as the men responsible for kidnapping him, the next thing to do is to find out their game."

"If I find out it's them, can't we sail right into 'em and get revenge?" demanded Ned.

"It wouldn't be either safe or wise," Bob answered. "If they are crooks in a big way, which I suspect from the kind of car they drive, and from this seaplane, they aren't going to be taken by surprise. And there are probably more than three of them. We three would hardly be a fair match."

"Then what are we going to do?" Harry asked.

"Sort of spy around and get a line on them at close range, without letting them know we're doing it," Bob suggested. "A lot of boats are going over there to have a look at the seaplane. We can do the same. In that way, as fellows satisfying a natural curiosity, we can get very close. Ned may recognize them or he may know them by their voices as the men who kidnapped him."

"And after that?" Ned asked.

"After that I think we should notify the police," Harry said.

"Before we know what their game is?" asked Bob.

"Their game was to kidnap Ned," Harry replied. "That's game enough and there's a heavy penalty for it, even if they didn't demand a ransom which they might have done if we hadn't rescued Ned."

"True enough, as far as it goes," admitted Bob. "But you don't differentiate, if you will allow me to use a twenty-five cent word, between cause and effect. Those fellows are up to some big crime game, I'm sure, and kidnapping Ned, and perhaps hoping to get you and me, Harry, was only a cog in the wheel. They wanted us out of the way."

"So they could go on with the game?" asked Ned.

"That's what I think, yes," Bob answered.

"Well, maybe you're right," assented Harry. "Go on, have your way, Bob."

"Well, then, my way would be *not* to notify the police even after we establish the fact that these men on the seaplane are the ones who kidnapped Ned. I say let's hold back until we can find out what their real object is and then, if we can't nab 'em ourselves, we'll call in the police."

"All right," murmured Ned, after thinking this over. "I'm with you on that, Bob."

"So am I!" came from Harry.

"Then," suggested Bob as he watched several small rowing craft, and one or two motor boats approach the mysterious seaplane, "we'll try and get a little closer. Ned, it's sort of up to you now."

"I'm game. Go ahead!"

CHAPTER XIV

A LOOK IN

GOLDEN and red, in a purple haze, the sun was setting back of the hills that studded the countryside west of Shark River, when Bob and his chums left the open deck of the *Dolphin* and entered the cabin for a conference after reaching the decision to spy upon the anchored seaplane.

"We ought to do something, I should say, so they wouldn't know us when we get too close," suggested Harry. "Especially Ned. They had a good look at him when they had him in Bailey's lobster shack."

"They sure did," Ned murmured. "They were too close to me!"

"And they don't know us quite so well, except by description," agreed Bob. "Ned's the one that must be careful."

"Well, here's one way to disguise!" Ned exclaimed. He had been tinkering with the motor a short time before, and his hands were oily and grimy. He rubbed them on his face. The transformation was startling.

"You look like a regular mechanic!" chuckled Harry.

"And when I pull this old cap down—like this ——!" Ned demonstrated with a disreputable headpiece that had been found aboard the *Dolphin.*

"Your own mother wouldn't know you!" exclaimed Bob. "You're safe enough from recognition, Ned."

"But what about us?" asked Harry.

"There's still plenty of dirt around that motor," Ned remarked. "I'd advise you two fellows to black up a little."

"Not a bad idea," Bob agreed. "Come on, Harry," and Bob soon had rubbed several grimy streaks on his face, an example followed by Harry. In addition Bob tied an oily, dirty rag around his head, in a turban effect, as if he had suffered a cut, and Harry further disguised himself by putting on a pair of dark glasses which had been provided for the steersman of the *Dolphin* when he had to stand in the glaring sun.

"I guess we're all set now," remarked Bob as he went to start the motor while Ned and Harry raised the anchor. The tide was coming in now and the seaplane, across the inlet, swung at her mooring line. Several of the fishing boats and pleasure launches, going and coming, had veered over to look at the aircraft now on the water. As a matter of fact, owing to the nearness of the state National Guard camping grounds of Sea Girt, not far from Belport, and the naval station at Lakehurst, farther off, the presence of air-

planes and seaplanes around this coast resort was more or less common. So this particular one did not attract as much attention as it would have done in some other section of the country where these ships are seldom seen. Hardly a day passed that one or more airplanes did not zoom over Belport and big dirigibles, as well as small blimps, passing up and down the coast were common sights.

Thus there was not the cluster of boats about the seaplane that would have crowded around the craft had her kind been more of a novelty. Still there were a few summer visitors who, presumably, never before had had this chance to inspect such a ship at close range. The occupants of these boats were quite near.

This was the case with a small launch that was moving just ahead of the *Dolphin*. It contained some girls and young fellows and the boys, probably to show how daring they were, put their launch very close alongside the seaplane. As they did so a voice aboard the strange craft angrily cried:

"Veer off! Keep away! What do you want to do; ram us? Keep your distance or you'll be sorry!"

"We want to see what you look like!" challenged a girl's shrill voice in the launch.

"We're not on exhibition! Keep away I tell you!" and the voice was menacing. A man looked out of the cockpit cabin, for the plane was a large

one with a cabin capable of housing several persons. "If you come any nearer," the man went on, "I'll douse you with this!" and he raised a pail threateningly.

"Oh, George! Don't go any closer!" nervously cried one girl.

"I'll show the big stiff!" threatened one of the boys.

But evidently he was not in authority, for another voice said:

"All right—we've seen enough!" And the launch veered away leaving the man standing on the steps leading into the cabin by way of a door cut in the side of the plane's fuselage.

"Ned," spoke Bob in a low, tense voice as the *Dolphin* moved closer to the seaplane, "do you recognize that man?"

"Can't say I do, Bob. He doesn't look like any of those who kidnapped me."

"How about the voice—is it familiar?"

Ned hesitated a second or two before answering, and then he said:

"No, I can't say it sounds at all like the voices of any of the men who carried me away."

"I didn't mean that exactly," Bob said.

"Then what did you mean?"

"I mean have you ever heard that voice before?"

"Well, that's a big order. No, I can't say I have, but, now you speak of it, there's something vaguely familiar about it."

"How about you, Harry?" Bob asked.

"Well, first I thought that fellow talked like somebody I had heard before, but I can't seem to remember."

"It may be only a coincidence," Bob said.

"How about yourself, Bob?" asked Ned. "Does that voice mean anything to you?"

If his chums could have seen Bob's face just then they might have greatly wondered, and Ned surely would have pressed for an answer. But as Bob kept silent, turning his head away and appearing to be intent on steering the *Dolphin* as close as possible to the seaplane, the other two boys let the matter drop.

And as just then Bob spoke to them it served further to put a sort of verbal smoke-screen around the question.

"Fellows, we're in luck," Bob went on. "The little run-in that fellow had with those boys and girls has taken his attention from us. We're going to get quite close before he sees us. It's getting dark fast. There go the lights inside the cabin. Ned, take a good look when we circle past and see if you can spot any of the men who took you away."

"I will!"

Bob's summing up of the situation was correct. The fact that the small launch had come rather dangerously close and that the man aboard the seaplane had lost his temper in ordering it away, served to focus his attention on that craft loaded

with rather impudent young folks. So the man stood looking at the disappearing small launch with his back to the *Dolphin* which was approaching equally as near but from the opposite side and behind him.

Then, too, Bob had throttled the motor down so that it made scarcely any noise at all, but turned the propeller over fast enough to give the craft sufficient speed. Added to this that it was getting dark now, and that there was a foggy haze over the inlet, and there were several factors in favor of the three boys.

As Bob had said, lights had been set aglow in the cabin of the seaplane and they would render the occupants visible, through the celluloid windows, to such outside observers as were near enough. And Bob Dexter had determined to put Ned near enough to enable him to view the men in the seaplane.

Swiftly and almost silently, the *Dolphin* drew near until she was abreast of the cabin of the seaplane.

"Look in, Ned! Quick!" ordered Bob in a tense voice.

Ned looked—it had to be a fleeting glance for they dared not stop. Just then the lookout, who was hidden from view on the other side of the plane's fuselage, heard the throbbing motors and scrambled up over the cabin coming to a stop sitting down astraddle the roof. Then he shouted:

"Get away from there! What are you trying

to do, anyhow; ram us? Get away!"

Bob speeded up the motor, swung the wheel over and the *Dolphin* darted away, her wash setting the seaplane to rocking so that the man on the cabin roof had to hold on or be shaken off.

"Don't you try a trick like that again!" roared the lookout.

"We won't have to if Ned saw your friends," Bob said in a low voice. "How about it, Ned, did you recognize any of the men?"

"I sure did! I saw the two who helped kidnap me!"

"Good!" exclaimed Harry. "I mean it's good we're on their trail!" he added quickly. "Come on, now, let's get 'em!"

"Not so fast!" said Bob, calmly. "This game is only half played. But the inning, so far, is in our favor, I think," he added. "Are you sure about those men, Ned?"

"Quite sure, yes!"

"Well, we'll make sure of it," spoke Bob.

"You mean you're going back now and give me another look?" asked Ned, apprehensively.

"No, that wouldn't be safe," Bob answered. "But we'll come back later. Just now we're going up to the cabin and eat."

"Welcome words!" murmured Harry, rubbing his stomach in the fashion approved by hungry adventurers on the stage.

CHAPTER XV

CAPTURED

"WHAT were they doing, Ned?" asked Harry, who was putting the final touches to a leg of a roast chicken.

"Who?"

"Those men in the cabin of the seaplane."

"They were looking at something on a sort of table, or maybe it was a shelf. Guess they don't have room for a regular table in that cabin."

"It's fairly big," Bob stated as he reached for a second helping of the roast chicken they had bought at the town delicatessen store after making the *Dolphin* fast. "So the men were looking at something; eh, Ned?"

"Yes. All I could see was a lot of white papers."

"Probably a route map in sections," suggested Harry.

"No, it didn't look like a map," objected Ned. "There were quite a number of white papers and they were small."

"They were?" asked Bob, quickly, and there was that in his voice which caused Ned to look up quickly and say:

"Sure! But what of it?"

"Oh—nothing!" Bob tried to make his voice indifferent, but he might not have succeeded if he had not quickly followed up his remark with: "Are you sure you recognized those fellows, Ned?"

"I'm quite sure," answered the kidnapped one, swallowing a big bite of chicken, "that two of the men in that seaplane cabin were two of the three who tackled me. There was a third man in the cabin when I looked in, but he had his back turned toward me."

"Well, two out of three is a pretty good average," Bob said. "Did you get a shot at 'em, Harry?"

"No. You said to give Ned the best chance to look in the cabin window, and I did, for I didn't see the kidnappers, nor did you, Bob."

"That's right. I intended to let Ned have the vantage point. I was so busy steering so we wouldn't bump into the plane, that I didn't dare look in the cabin."

"Well, I think we've won the first leg of the race," remarked Bob. "And we'll soon have a go at the second."

"Speaking of legs," murmured Harry as he fished among the bits of chicken on the plate, "where's the liver of this bird?"

"I didn't see it," Ned remarked, helping his chum in the search. Harry was very fond of chicken livers and as his chums did not care for

this portion they always let him have their share.

"Guess delicatessen chickens don't have livers," chuckled Bob. "But eat up, fellows. We're going out again."

"Where?" demanded Harry. "Ah, there it is!" he exclaimed, spearing the liver on his fork. "But it's a very small one!"

"We're going back to that seaplane and have another look in," Bob answered. "I want Ned to be actually positive, not casually so."

"If I have another look at 'em I can be, I'm sure," Ned answered. "But isn't it a risk, Bob, going back there again?"

"There's a risk of not finding the seaplane there—yes. They may take off while we're feasting away here."

"I don't call this much of a feast—not a chicken with a liver as small as that!" Harry grumbled. "I like 'em bigger."

"Well, feasting or not, if we stay here eating they may slip away," Bob went on. "They may be suspicious or it may be their game only to come down here to stay but for a short time to overhaul the motor. Anyhow, as soon as you fellows get enough we'll drop back down the inlet and have a look."

"I suppose we might as well," admitted Harry, taking a bit of white meat. "We'll never get any peace from Bob until we have this mystery solved."

"Well, I'd like to solve my kidnapping end of

it, anyhow!" came from Ned.

"Oh, sure! I'm not going to back out," Harry quickly said. "But it does seem to me they could get chickens with bigger livers!"

"You make me tired!" Bob said. "Come on—finish up!"

"Do we disguise again?" asked Ned. "If we do I'm sorry I washed for supper. Those smudge spots made me look real cute!"

"I think," was Bob's opinion, "if we all wear caps and pull 'em well down over our faces, we won't be recognized. Ned is the only one who runs a risk that way, anyhow, and he can keep under cover."

"All right—let's go!" Harry said, pushing away his plate. "We'll leave the dishes until we get back," he suggested.

"Sure!" Ned assented.

If the boys had known how long it was before they would get back to their cottage they might have done the dishes then and there.

Once more they were aboard the *Dolphin*. It was night now, a dark night with a storm impending if the signs were a sighing wind out of the northeast and scudding clouds, seen now and then when there was a break so that a star peered through.

"I think we're in for a spell of wetness," observed Ned as he started the motor, Harry and Bob attending to the mooring lines.

"And some blow," added Bob. "I wouldn't

like to be a lobsterman out at sea at all hours of the night, with a chance for a storm coming and a motor going on the blink."

"It must be risky," Ned agreed. "But folks like Harry must have their lobsters."

"What do you mean—me?" indignantly demanded his chum.

"Well, you're one of those high livers—*chicken* livers," went on Ned, "and poor men have to go out to sea in a storm to satisfy your jaded appetite!"

"Oh, you make me tired!" complained Harry. "Just because I like chicken livers is no sign I want a man to go out in a storm to haul lobster pots. They'll do it anyhow. I'm not the only one who likes lobsters!"

"Sure not!" chimed in Bob. "Don't let him get your goat!"

"I won't," said Harry.

Then the *Dolphin* was swung out into the channel and proceeded down Shark River to the bay and inlet where the seaplane was anchored. There were not many other craft out that night. The coming storm probably discouraged pleasure-seekers. And as the boat of the chums dropped down toward the sea, the surf of which could be heard pounding the beach, Ned observed:

"How can those fellows go ashore when they want to—I mean from the seaplane? It was anchored quite a ways out from the jetty."

"They may have a collapsible boat, or they

may engage one from some of the fishing chaps about here," Bob suggested.

"Yes, I guess they could do that," agreed Ned. "Well, we're getting close now. Can either of you fellows make out if the plane is still there?"

They strained their eyes through the darkness. Several other regular sea or river craft were riding at anchor, with the lights prescribed by maritime law. But for some time neither Bob nor his chums could make out anything of the craft they sought when they looked, as nearly as they could estimate, in the direction where they had last seen it anchored.

"Guess they've skipped," remarked Harry, disappointment in his voice.

"And we may never see 'em again! Worse luck!" exclaimed Ned. "I wanted a crack at those fellows!"

"No, she hasn't gone—there she is!" Bob said in a low voice.

"Where?" demanded his two chums.

"Right in line, now, with the light out on the end of the fishing pier. See her, low down."

"Oh, yes!" answered Harry.

"She's there all right," Ned admitted as the unmistakable outlines of the seaplane showed up against the white breakers of the ocean now dimly seen through the winding inlet.

Cautiously the *Dolphin* approached.

"There isn't a light on board!" murmured Ned.

"They must be all ashore!" whispered Harry.

"But I should think they would leave riding lights for fear of being bumped into."

"Guess they figured nobody would be around tonight, with a storm coming," remarked Bob. "Well, I guess we're out of luck."

He let the *Dolphin* move along until it was close alongside the mysterious seaplane now shrouded in darkness.

Putting out a hand, as Jerry reversed the propeller, causing the *Dolphin* to come almost to a stop, Ned caught hold of the seaplane and made a daring suggestion.

"Fellows!" he exclaimed, "as long as they aren't here why not get aboard and have a look around?"

"Would we dare?" asked Harry.

"Why not? Who can stop us?" demanded Ned. "Maybe we haven't a right, but we won't do any harm. Let's go in—provided we can get in."

"What say, Bob?" asked Harry.

"I don't believe they have any locks on doors to a seaplane cabin," answered the young detective. "And, as Ned says, we don't intend any harm. Besides, these fellows have laid themselves liable to the law, kidnapping Ned as they did. I say let's go aboard!"

"The ayes have it!" Harry murmured. "I'm with you. Make fast!"

It was the work of but a few seconds to moor the *Dolphin* to the unknown seaplane and then,

standing on the rear deck of the motor boat, Bob reached over and tried the door that led into the cabin of the mysterious craft.

"It's open!" he said in a low voice. "Shall we go in!"

"Sure!" chorused his chums.

So they went in.

"Unknowing and to our doom!" as Harry described it afterward.

Having had in mind some such outcome of the visit as had actually come about, the boys were prepared with flashlights, and these they now switched on as they found themselves in the cabin of the seaplane.

"Some plane!" exclaimed Ned, for indeed the cabin, though small, was well fitted up. There were lockers along the sides, and the cushions on them seemed to indicate they might be used for sleeping berths. There was the table, or, rather, shelf which Ned had seen before.

"And there's a pantry!" exclaimed Harry as the gleams of the flashlights revealed another compartment opening back of the main cabin. "They must cook and eat on board."

"But where's the motor and control room?" asked Ned.

"Must be ahead of this partition," Bob said, tapping one on which were several instruments to indicate the height and speed of the plane when in motion, and others to show the functioning of the motor.

"This is one swell seaplane!" exclaimed Ned.

"I wonder what it's used for?" came from Harry. "And why men with such a boat as this would bother with kidnapping Ned. Not that you aren't worth kidnapping, Ned, old man, but I'd like to know why."

"So would I," agreed the recent victim.

"It's all part of the mystery we have to solve," suggested Bob. "And if we look around a bit—what's that?" he broke off suddenly, putting the question in a tense voice. His chums were aware of a bumping, tapping sound outside the plane.

But before Ned or Harry could answer, the outer door of the cabin, on the side opposite where the boys had entered, swung open and a big, light-haired man, with a ruddy face entered. He smiled at the boys in what seemed a tantalizing and sinister manner as he said, in a voice that had a touch of foreign accent:

"Young gentlemen, allow me to welcome you!"

The pilot of the mysterious seaplane had returned most unexpectedly!

Instinctively Harry and Ned made a dash toward the other door as if to get out. But as they approached it that portal also opened and another man, evidently of the same nationality as the first but smaller, came in. He, too, smiled malevolently, and at the sight of him Ned cried:

"There's one of my kidnappers!"

"Ah, so we have you again, my young friend," said the bigger of the two men whom Ned had

not seemed to recognize. "We have you again!"

"You have us—what do you mean?" asked Bob, boldly. "I admit we had no right to come aboard your plane in your absence. But we also think, in fact we know, you had no right to take him away!" and he pointed at Ned. "But we'll go now and ——"

"Oh, no, you won't go!" exclaimed the big man, and his voice was menacing.

"Why not?" Bob demanded.

"Because, my young friends," and again came that evil smile, "you are prisoners! Hanker, come here!"

Stunned by this declaration, Bob and his chums stood there helpless.

CHAPTER XVI

UP AND AWAY

DOUBTLESS the three boys, for an instant, at least, contemplated resistance—a fight—an escape —a rough-and-tumble encounter—anything which might have given them the advantage over the two men. But, aside from their small flashlights, neither Bob nor his chums held any weapon. They had not thought to bring even some clubs.

And as they stood there, the gleam of the three pocket torches making the seaplane cabin quite light, a third man suddenly entered—a big man of a stern and cruel cast of countenance.

"Hanker, help us to take charge of our uninvited guests!" sharply ordered the bigger of the two who had entered and trapped the boys. "They may cause trouble."

"Not with me!" snapped the third man—evidently the Hanker summoned. "I know how to handle 'em!"

He turned a switch on the cabin wall, near the door by which he had entered.

At once the place was flooded with light, and after Bob and his chums had blinked a little to accustom their eyes to the sudden illumination,

they saw Hanker and the other two men advancing toward them with eager, outstretched hands.

"Look here!" Bob quickly exclaimed. "You have the best of us so we won't fight."

"A wise decision," said Hanker who was evidently a mechanic and a hired hand in contrast to the two better dressed and more domineering principals. "You wouldn't have fought long if you'd started anything," he said significantly, and the boys saw that he had a cruel blackjack in one hand. A comparatively gentle blow from the leaden end of that short, flexible shaft will render the strongest man temporarily incapable of doing anything, and a little more force means death.

"But look here!" went on Bob. "I don't know what your game is, but it's something crooked, I'm sure. We didn't intend to butt in, but since you kidnapped him," and he pointed at Ned, "we're out to get you and we're going to!"

"It seems to me that the affair is the other way about," said the bigger of the two blond men. "We have *you*!"

"For a time, maybe, yes," admitted Harry.

"For as long a time as we please!" snarled Hanker. "Shall I take 'em inside?" he asked the big man.

"Yes, but don't be any more rough than you need to. After all, though uninvited, these are our guests," and his voice was sneering as he laughed at his prisoners.

"But you can't keep us here like this!" burst

out Ned. "Maybe we didn't have any right to come aboard your plane, but let that go. We only evened matters up—you didn't have any right to come in our cabin and take me away."

"So far," spoke the big man, blandly, "you have rendered the account even. But you are still in our debt and we can only square matters by keeping you with us—until after a certain time," he added significantly. "So take care of them, Hanker."

"I will, yes, sir. Now, then, my lads, if you aren't going to fight come with me. If you are going to fight I'll take you one by one and the taking won't be pleasant!" His voice was menacingly grim.

"We'll come quietly," Bob said, realizing, when too late, how he had foolishly led his chums into this trap.

"But what are you going to do with us?" demanded Ned.

"Keep you prisoners for a while," said the big man. "After that ——"

He shrugged his shoulders and looked toward his companion. They were, obviously, of the same race, if not actually brothers.

"Who knows," and the small man made a dismissing gesture with his hands. "You shall see—what you shall see!" he concluded enigmatically.

If Bob Dexter thought there was a chance, as he said later, he would have given the word, then and there, for his chums to join him in a desperate

rush to escape. But the odds were too heavy against them. They were taken at a disadvantage. It would be better to submit quietly, now, hoping for a chance, later, either to escape or to attack their captors.

"This way!" ordered Hanker, opening a small door at the rear wall of the cabin, a door in line with, but on the other side of the craft from the portal giving into the small galley or kitchen.

"Come on!" Bob advised his chums in a low voice.

"But what about our motor boat, the *Dolphin*?" asked Ned.

"Yes," chimed in Harry. "We made her fast to your plane and ——"

"She has been cast off," said the big man.

"Cast off!" cried Bob. "Why, that wasn't our boat. I hired it from a sick man and ——"

"Have no fear!" interrupted the big man, as Hanker stood waiting for the prisoners to follow him to what might be a dungeon. "We have no wish ruthlessly to destroy the property of any poor man. We cast off your motorboat, but it has been piloted to shore and anchored there safely. There it will remain until some one notifies the owner about it and he can come and claim his property. If you left any of your possessions aboard they will be brought here by my man who took the *Dolphin* away."

"There was nothing of ours in her," said Bob. "But this is a very bold thing you are doing!"

he exclaimed. "You can't keep us prisoners very long and when we get away, as we shall, surely, we'll make it hot for you!"

"I'll say!" muttered Harry.

"And I'll prefer charges against you for kidnapping me!" cried Ned.

"Doubtless you will, *when* you get away, my young visiting friends," sneered the big man. "But when you get away it will be when it pleases us to let you and when you can do no harm to us.

"Remember this!" he went on more sternly, the banter rapidly leaving his harsh voice. "This situation is of your own making. You thrust, to use a homely expression, your noses into our affairs and you must not complain if they are pinched," and he illustrated by a clenching, rubbing motion of his thumb and finger. "You walked into the trap we set for you and you will find it is not easy to escape from. But we have no quarrel with the man from whom you hired the *Dolphin,* so we have taken care of that craft for you. Now, Hanker, take them away—unless," he added, with a mocking smile, "you boys have not dined this evening."

"We had all we wanted!" growled Harry.

"Good! Then I shall bid you good-bye until morning. You will then be given breakfast—as our *guests*!" and he laughed inwardly as he accented the word.

Escorted by Hanker, Bob and his chums found themselves in a small room at the rear of the

seaplane. It was evidently a sort of auxiliary cabin, for it contained four shelf-like bunks around the walls. There was a small porthole above the heads of the prisoners, and fresh air came in through it. But the opening was covered with an iron grill. In any event it was too small to afford egress.

"Well, here's where you'll stay for a while!" taunted Hanker as he went out, and they heard him lock the door.

For a moment or two the three were silent, grimly regarding one another in the light of a ceiling, incandescent bulb. Then Bob said:

"This is a fine pickle I got you fellows into!"

"It's as much our fault as yours," Ned observed.

"Sure!" agreed Harry. "But I wonder——"

"What's that?" sharply interrupted Bob. There was a hum, a vibration and motion to the seaplane.

"We're going up!" exclaimed Harry.

And up and away they went.

CHAPTER XVII

IN THE SWAMP

HARDLY able to realize what had happened to them, so swift had been the occurrence of events, Bob and his chums stood in their prison cabin and looked at one another. Bob jumped up and tried to catch his fingers on the ledge of the circular porthole, but there was no room for him to get a grip.

"What's the idea?" asked Harry.

"I wanted to see if I could get a look outside," Bob answered.

"Do you think they're really flying away with us?" asked Ned.

"Well, we are flying with them, or they with us—doesn't matter, much, how you put it," Bob answered.

"But we sure are moving!" Harry exclaimed.

There was no doubt of it. The trembling and vibration of the seaplane was evidence enough had not there been the additional confirmation of a humming, throbbing noise which only could come from a powerful motor or motors.

"Yes, they took off with us all right," went

on Bob. "Oh, what a chump I was to lead you fellows into a fix like this! Rotten!"

"You led yourself into it as much as you did us," stated Ned.

"As if that was any excuse!" exclaimed Bob, bitterly. "I'm a swell detective, I am! Don't ever let me hear you fellows call me a sleuth again!" he said, and meant it.

"Oh, shucks!" came from Harry. "Everybody makes a mistake—that's why they put rubbers on the end of lead pencils. You'll pull out of this all right, Bob. Go to it now! Let's sit down and talk this over."

"Yes, we may as well do that," Bob agreed, going over to one of the shelf bunks which had blankets and pillows on them. "They seem to have provided for our comfort, at any rate," he went on. "And as we can't do anything to stop them flying us over the North Pole, if they want to, we might as well take an account of stock."

"Where do you think they will take us?" Ned asked.

"Who knows?" countered Bob.

"And why have they made us prisoners?" Harry wanted to know.

"Because," Bob answered, "they are afraid we are onto their game and may give them away. I only wish I did know the secret."

"Can't you get any line on it?" asked Ned.

"Well, I have a certain suspicion," Bob said,

"but it's so fantastic that I'm not going to speak of it until I get more evidence. All I know now is that I blundered into this trap and we're being held as prisoners where we can't do anything to hamper these fellows in their game."

"That's it—if we only knew what game they were playing," murmured Harry.

"We don't even seem to know the rules!" exclaimed Ned. "But do you think there's any chance of getting out of this hole, Bob?"

" 'Tisn't such a bad hole," was the answer as Bob looked around the snug little cabin. "We've been in worse holes."

"In the cave of the Jint San," suggested Harry.

"At Gib Tolliver's," chuckled Ned.

"Sure! But as for getting out of here—looks sort of hopeless," and Bob, after testing with the point of his knife the texture of the walls and door, said, in explanation: "All metal!"

"Then this is one of those new, all-metal, fireproof planes," remarked Harry. "Well, there's a comfort in that."

"What comfort?" asked Ned.

"We can't catch fire!"

"Small comfort there," Ned murmured. "Say, we must be traveling fast!" he added as the plane lurched.

"Yes, they're getting up speed and we're probably flying high," Bob remarked. "Too bad we can't get a view of the country below. But then it's dark and we couldn't see much, anyhow."

"Do you think, when it's daylight, they'll let us take some observations?" Harry wanted to know.

"I doubt it," spoke Bob, dryly. "We'll just have to make the best of it here. Anyhow we can stretch out and rest," and he lay back on one of the bunks.

"Before we go to sleep—and I don't believe I shall," said Ned, "I'd like to know if either of you have an idea what this is all about. I can't even seem to guess."

"Nor I," added Harry and then they both looked at Bob.

"All I can say," began that youth, "is that these fellows are up to something illegal—that they're afraid will be found out—and, as we seem to have stumbled over their trail, they're putting us out of the way."

"Out of the way!" gasped Ned for the words had a sinister sound.

"Well, I mean temporarily," Bob corrected.

"That's better!" Harry murmured. "But I do wish we had a line on why they are holding us—I mean what game they're playing."

"Look here, Ned," spoke Bob. "When you first looked in the windows of this plane—I mean late this afternoon, you say you saw the men bending over a table, or shelf, on which there were white papers."

"That's right."

"It couldn't have been white stones; could it?"

"No, they were papers all right. I saw them flutter. Why?"

"Oh, nothing much. But I happened to think of the question that was asked of us the night I caught the big bass—'what of the white stones?' —you know. And I was wondering if you had made a mistake."

"Stones and paper aren't much alike," Harry said.

"Why do you think they went away, leaving the plane in darkness, and so that anybody who wished could enter?" asked Ned, after a few moments of silence.

"To trap us—what else?" asked Bob. "Fellows, I think they must have recognized us, in spite of our disguises, when we were in the *Dolphin* late this afternoon. They must have guessed that we would come back later to try and find out this secret, so they skipped out, probably hid in a boat near here and set the trap which we sprung on ourselves. Oh, we were clever—I don't think!"

"Never mind!" consoled Ned. "We'll beat 'em yet!"

"Sure!" echoed Harry.

While the boys were talking and vainly surmising the seaplane was winging its way through the darkness. Whither they were bound none of the three knew. But that they had evidently flown into a storm was soon evident, for the dash of rain could be heard against the roof and outer

wall of their prison cabin. The drops fell fast.

Luckily the boys had eaten a hearty supper before being caught. There was no food visible in their cabin, but there was a pitcher of water and some glasses in a rack on the wall, so arranged that the careening of the ship would not tumble them out. Being thirsty, the boys drank and felt better.

They made a careful inspection of the room but saw no way of getting out and, though each one possessed a knife, it was useless on the metal surfaces. The door was firmly closed and locked and the port hole too high up and small to be of any service.

In spite of the novelty and danger of their plight, drowsiness at length overcame all three and they stretched out on the bunks. Each one mentally told himself he would never sleep, but they all did, while the seaplane swept on through the black night of storm.

It was morning when the three awakened, all about the same time. And it was daylight, as was evidenced by the fact that the ceiling bulb was out and through the grille of the porthole came the light of dawn.

"Are we still moving?" asked Ned, for little motion could be felt.

"I think so," Harry answered.

"Yes, we are," declared Bob. "But we're riding easy and not very fast."

"I wish we knew how far we'd come, and where

we are," mused Ned. "This is like being shut up in a barrel and going over Niagara Falls. I wish they'd let us out."

"Or at least open up and let us know where we are," added Bob.

"And give us some breakfast!" added Harry. "I'd be glad of even a little chicken liver, now."

"Oh, you and your livers!" murmured Ned.

Suddenly they were aware of a different motion to the seaplane. They were slanting down.

"We're going to land!" cried Harry.

"Or sea!" added Bob, with grim humor.

"That's right—they have taken us halfway across the Atlantic!" exclaimed Ned.

A few minutes later the boys were aware that the seaplane had landed somewhere in water. Gradually it came to a stop. The door of their cabin was unlocked, opened and Hanker thrust his head in.

"You can come out to breakfast if you like," he said, with no enthusiasm in his voice.

"Thanks—a lot!" spoke Bob.

He led his chums out along a short passage that connected with the main cabin. The day had fully come now and, looking out of the side windows, Bob uttered an exclamation.

The seaplane had come down on an inland swamp. All about were tall, gaunt trees, giant pines with dead, spiny branches sticking out from the withered trunks. The centre of the dismal morass was a sort of lake which afforded a good

landing for the seaplane, but all about was evidence of death in nature. A lone heron, flapping its big wings and trailing its long legs, flew over the dreary waste of water.

"Well, here you are, boys," chuckled Hanker. "And let me advise you not to try to wade ashore. They say this swamp hasn't any bottom. And I'm inclined to believe it."

Why had the boys' captors brought them to this dismal spot?

CHAPTER XVIII

THE WIRELESS OPERATOR

BEFORE Bob and his chums had quite taken in all the aspects of the dismal swamp scene which spread before them out of the windows of the cabin of the seaplane, and almost before they realized that they had landed after a mysterious night trip, Hanker, who seemed to be the only one of their captors in evidence, remarked:

"You can eat if you like. But," he added with a snarl in his voice, "don't try any tricks! I've got plenty of help—up forward," and he nodded toward the compartment ahead of the main cabin —the motor cabin, as the boys guessed. From it came a sound of metal clinking on metal. It might be mechanics working on the engine.

"Forced landing?" asked Bob.

"None of your business!" snapped Hanker. "Don't ask any questions and you won't be told any lies. You're here and we're here and you can eat if you like."

"If you ask for chicken livers I'll—I'll kick you!" Ned whispered in his chum's ear.

"I'm not likely to—at breakfast," Harry said, laughing.

"I assume you aren't going to cut up rough," went on Hanker. "Take it from me, boys, it won't get you anywhere. And I'd advise you to snap out of this—when you get the chance," he added significantly. "Which won't be at once. But if you want to act decent I'll get you something to eat and put you ashore—for a time."

"Ashore?" exclaimed Bob. "I thought you said this was a bottomless swamp."

"It is—but there's a solid place where we have a shack and that's where you're to stay for a while. But first do you want to eat and will you promise not to try any tricks?"

"We want to eat and we'll be decent, as you call it, for a while," Bob promised, giving his chums a warning glance. "Further than that we won't agree to anything."

"That suits me. I'll be rid of you in a little while anyhow. My orders go only to giving you something to eat and putting you in the shack."

"What shack?" asked Ned.

"Look over there." Hanker pointed out of a window on the port side of the seaplane. The boys saw, built on what seemed to be the only solid ground in the combined lake and swamp, a small cabin. From the chimney smoke was lazily curling into the morning air.

"Are we to stay there?" Harry asked.

"For a while—yes."

"Well, I guess we can't help ourselves," and Bob shrugged his shoulders.

"Now you're talking sensible," and for the first time Hanker seemed human. "All right. Now you can eat!"

In spite of the novelty and danger of their situation, the boys smiled at this news.

"Wash up if you like," Hanker said, opening the door of a small toilet room. "I'll set out the grub—it's all ready."

They were glad to refresh themselves with soap and water, and they found plenty of clean towels which, somehow or other, raised their estimation of their captors.

"Whatever game these birds are working," observed Ned as he finished his toilet, "they aren't cheap skates. That's nice soap!"

"Has a good smell, anyhow," commented Bob, not committing himself as to the character of the mysterious owners of the seaplane.

"And I know a better smell!" chuckled Harry.

"What?" chorused the other two.

"Bacon, eggs and coffee! Oh, boy!" Harry rubbed his stomach in anticipation.

"Hope you're right. Yes, you are!" exclaimed Ned when they went into the main cabin to find a table, not elaborately set, but with sufficient bacon, eggs, coffee and bread and butter to satisfy the hungriest lad, of which there were three present then and there.

"Well, do you feel better?" asked Hanker, who had eaten with them. The meal was over

and it was a good one. The boys enjoyed it.

"In one way we do," Bob answered. "But we'd feel a lot better if we knew what was going to happen to us."

"Nothing serious—if you act decent," was the grim reply. "It's up to you boys. You butted in on a game and now you've got to abide by the rules."

"We will—as soon as we know 'em," said Harry.

"You won't ever know all of 'em!" chuckled their guard—the only member of the mysterious trio they had seen so far this morning. "But if you'll take my advice you'll go slow. When the right time comes you'll be allowed to skip out. But again, take it from me, don't try to wade this swamp! It's deadly and deep. Stick to the shack on dry land."

"We aren't there yet," observed Ned.

"You will be—soon. I've got orders to take you ashore right soon, and if you've had enough to eat we'll go."

"You mean we are to be transferred to that shack?" and Bob pointed to the one seen on a point of land—seemingly the only solid bit in that morass of lake and swamp.

"That's it. Let's get going. You haven't any baggage, I take it."

"No, worse luck!" muttered Harry.

"Not even pajamas," added Ned.

"You'll find some things in the shack," said Hanker. "Even tooth brushes if you run that fine."

"We do!" said Bob.

"I thought you did. Well, you'll find this bunch isn't half bad. All you got to be is to act decent and they'll do the same. Now come on!"

This last was a surly order and the boys thought it best to obey. For an instant Bob had a wild idea of inciting his chums to riot, so they might all three fall at once on Hanker and overpower him. But Bob feared there might be others close at hand in the seaplane who would come to the rescue. And, since they had not landed during the night, the two blond men must still be somewhere about. So the idea of resistance was abandoned and the boys followed Hanker out of the side door and into a small collapsible rubber boat which he rowed to the point of land on which stood the shack.

"Make yourselves at home, boys," invited Hanker as he rowed back to the anchored seaplane. "You'll find somebody in there to look out for you until we come back. And," he added with a sinister chuckle, "don't try to wade through the swamp. There are snakes and it hasn't any bottom—take it from me."

Undecided what to do, rather forlorn and anxious, Bob and his chums stood on the spit of land, seemingly the only solid bit in all that dreary waste of dead trees, a gloomy lake and swamp.

Behind them was the shack, the only sign of life being the smoke from the chimney. Actually the mysterious seaplane seemed almost like home to them, now. It was the only thing that linked them to Belport.

Watching, they saw Hanker row the boat around the opposite side of the mysterious craft of air and water. It must have been taken on board for, a little later, while they still stood there, the motors began to throb and roar and the seaplane, parting the waters of the lake in a double wave, shot up into the air and disappeared over the gaunt trees.

"They've gone!" exclaimed Ned.

"Looks like it!" said Harry.

"And left us here—gosh only knows where!" went on Ned.

"Might be in the Everglades of Florida," said Harry.

"Hardly as far as that, I think," observed Bob with an assumption of cheerfulness he did not altogether feel. "But we sure are out in a dismal place."

"I never did like snakes!" murmured Harry.

"And this water looks deep!" added Ned.

"Well, we won't try to wade it!" Bob said. "Let's go up and have a look in the shack. It seems human, at least."

The three walked up the spit of land. Behind them was the lake, apparently of deeper water than the stagnant pools of the swamp that en-

circled it. And about the lake, and studded in the morass, were weird trees, some so decayed and dead that they had fallen and lodged against their neighbors, like stricken men trying to hold themselves up.

As the boys neared the shack, or cabin, a peculiar noise came to them. They knew it at once.

"Wireless!" ejaculated Ned.

"Sending fast, too," came from Harry. "Maybe it's announcing to the world that we have arrived."

"Let's have a look!" proposed Bob.

They went up to the shack, walked around it, since the front door was not open, and, as they neared the back, the staccato snapping of the blue sparks sounded more plainly. The boys looked into a completely equipped wireless room and glanced at the operator seated before a table, with a maze of dials and gages in front of him. And after one look at the wireless man, who was sending, but who had no ear 'phones on, Bob cried aloud:

"Gilly Muzzlewig!"

CHAPTER XIX

PRISONERS ASHORE

SILENCE, for a moment, followed this momentous announcement. But if Bob Dexter hoped to take by surprise the man at the wireless key he was mistaken. The operator turned slowly, gazed at Bob and then at his chums with an unrecognizing glance and casually remarked:

"I guess you have made a mistake. My name isn't Muzzlewig—I would not own such a cognomen. And I don't know you—never saw you before! Not to take you up short, but I never saw you before."

"But—why—I'm sure ——" stammered Bob. And then, was it imagination or did he detect a swift glance of warning from the unblinking eyes of the wireless operator? Bob was uncertain but he let his voice trail off into: "Well, I guess I am mistaken. I thought you looked like a friend of mine."

"Is that a compliment?" asked the operator as he turned back to his instruments.

"Yes, I guess so," Bob answered. He was at a loss what to do. But on the assumption that it was a look of warning that had flashed from

the operator's eyes, even as blue sparks were flashing from his key, the young detective added: "It's queer how I made that mistake!" At the same time Bob nudged Harry and whispered: "Say the same thing!"

Luckily Harry understood the need of dissembling and of caution for he added:

"Yes, I sure thought this was Mr. Muzzlewig, but, now that I look a second time I can see where we made the mistake."

"He did look like him at first," said Ned, for Harry, in turn, had nudged him, following Bob's lead.

Bob shot a swift glance around the wireless room. He was looking for some other occupant —some other member of the mysterious, sinister gang that had kidnapped him and his chums, first making them prisoners of the air and now prisoners ashore. But Bob saw no one who might have been listening—no one who would make it necessary for Gilly Muzzlewig to send him that warning glance.

That the wireless operator was Gilly Muzzlewig, or the person the boys had known by that name, Bob was certain. So were Ned and Harry for no sooner had their chum mentioned the odd title than their memories went back in lightning-like flashes and they beheld him coming from a hole in the ground, bursting his buttons from a suit that fitted too tightly, and battling with the

Chinese. For Gilly Muzzlewig, as he called himself, had fallen in with the three boys the summer before, when, in searching for the mysterious airplane, they had stumbled over the trail of the still more mystic Jint San. Mr. Muzzlewig had admitted, then, that he was a detective on the trail of a certain man, but when he parted from Bob and his chums, after the Jint San problem was solved, the sleuth had not found his quarry.

"Yes, mistakes will happen," drawled the wireless operator, and even Bob had to admit that the voice was not that of their friend in the former adventures. "I'm sorry I can't claim acquaintance with you. And, if it's all the same to you, I'm afraid you'll have to get out of here. I am busy and ——"

"Oh, excuse us," Bob broke in. "We didn't mean to intrude but those men on the seaplane sent us up here—they said somebody would look after us and ——"

"We've been kidnapped and we're prisoners!" burst out Harry. "We've had a raw deal and if you can send word to the police we'll be willing to pay for the message."

"This is a private station—I cannot send out any messages except those filed by those same gentlemen on the seaplane. As for you being prisoners, and kidnapped, I know nothing of that. But I will give you one bit of advice. If you are prisoners ——"

"There's no question but what we are!" cried Ned, bitterly.

"Well, then, I'd advise you to stay on this bit of solid ground. Whatever you do, don't try to wade the swamp—it's deadly dangerous!" There was no question, now, about the sincerity of the wireless operator. Whoever he might be, Gilly Muzzlewig in disguise or some one who looked like him, he meant what he said. "Stay right here!" he said with emphasis. "It's better to be prisoners than the victims of snakes or alligators."

"Then we are in Florida!" cried Bob, understandingly.

"I don't know where you are except you're in my way!" snapped the wireless man and his voice held no friendliness. "Please get out. You know best whether you are prisoners or not."

"That's what they are, Carson!" interrupted a new voice and a husky chap, in physique a match for Hanker of the seaplane, stood in the doorway of the shack.

"It's up to you boys what sort of treatment you rate from me," he said with an air that had in it something of good nature but more of sinister menace and warning. "Treat me fair and I'll treat you fair. I've got to keep you here for a certain time, and it won't be hard for you can't run far. Go that way and you'll be in an alligator's jaws before you can swim ten

strokes," and he pointed to the lake, or lagoon. "Go that way and a cotton-mouth or copperhead will soon put an end to your escape," and he waved to the dismal swamp all about him.

"But stay here and you'll be as safe as you were before," he went on, indicating the shack and the spit of land on which it was built. "You'll be given decent food and have a place to sleep, which is more than you could get there," and he tossed a dead stick into the swamp. It struck what seemed to be a log but in an instant that same log came into being and swam away lazily.

"An alligator!" gasped Bob.

"And look!" whispered Ned, pointing to a brilliantly spotted snake, gliding along at the edge where the land and black water of the swamp met.

"Copperhead!" chuckled the man who had addressed the wireless operator as Carson. "There's plenty of 'em here if you boys want to make a collection. As for me, I leave 'em alone."

"And quite right, too, Kranter," said the man in the wireless room. "I was telling the boys that when they blundered in here. Do you know what to do with them?"

"Sure! I had word! I'm to hold 'em here until the chief gets back or lets me know what to do with 'em. Come on! Carson has his work to do. And maybe you can eat!"

"Might as well," Bob murmured as he swung

out of the room. He looked at the operator to see if he would give any look which could be interpreted but none came. The vicious snapping of the sparks went on.

"Here's where you'll hang out until I find what's going to be done with you," said Kranter opening the door of a small log cabin that was attached to, but which had no connection with the larger shack. "You can sleep here and eat here—I'll bring you grub three times a day—plain but good—for I'm no fancy cook. And you can walk about here as much as you please. But keep out of the wireless room and don't bother Carson. He's always busy. As for me, you can talk to me if you like—when I'm not cooking—but I won't answer any questions. As a matter of fact I can't—for I don't know why you were brought here and I don't care. It's none of my business. I do what I'm paid for and let it go at that.

"So do as you please, up to certain limits, but don't try to swim the lake or wade the swamp—neither will be healthy. Make yourselves at home," he went on with a laugh as he waved to the interior of the cabin. It consisted of but two rooms, with no upper floor. One room held a table and some chairs, with dishes in a wall cupboard. In the other room were some bunks with blankets on.

"And now I've got to see about some grub

for me and Carson, and I'll get some for you," added Kranter who spoke with a faint trace of foreign accent.

"Well, fellows, what do you make of this?" asked Bob when their jailer, as they considered him, had walked away leaving them in the cabin.

CHAPTER XX

THE BLACK SENTINEL

HARRY walked around the cabin, in and out of both rooms, before replying to his chum. Ned sat down on one of the bunks, and Bob stood in the doorway, looking into the dense, almost tropical-like growth of trees and tangled vines that extended back of the cabin. This, and the main building, appeared to be erected on a spit of land that ran out into the swamp and part way into the lake. For an instant Bob had an idea that perhaps this solid peninsula might run far enough back into the mainland to afford means of escape—a bridge away from the swamp and lake with the deadly alligators, cotton-mouths and copperheads. But this idea was shattered a moment later when Kranter came back, with some trays of food and said:

"Don't think of it, my boy!"

"What?" asked Bob, almost before he realized that he had fallen into the trap.

"Trying to escape that way. It isn't a neck of land, as you might suppose. You're on an island—the swamp is all about you. Take my advice and stay right here."

"Well, I guess you win!" murmured Harry coming from inside to see who was talking.

"But if we ever do get away from here!" burst out Ned, and the vindictiveness of his voice was apparent, "I'll ——"

"Take it easy!" advised Bob in a low voice. "This is no time to start a row!"

"Not with eats in the offing!" added Harry.

Kranter brought the food in and put it on the table. It was plain, but looked well prepared and had a most appetizing aroma. The boys were hungrier than they realized. It was some time since they had eaten breakfast aboard the seaplane.

"I'll leave you to yourselves," Kranter went on. "When you finish you can bring the dishes over to my kitchen," and he indicated a sort of shed built onto the main building as the log cabin prison was.

"All right," Bob said. And when he and his chums had taken the first sharp edges off their appetites he went on (Kranter having gone away) by saying: "What do you fellows make of this?"

"Very little," Ned replied, and in spite of the abundance of the meal his voice was gloomy.

"It's the biggest mystery I was ever up against," admitted Harry. "The Jint San was nothing to this!"

"Do you fellows think that was Muzzlewig—I mean that wireless operator?" asked Bob.

"First I did," Ned answered, "but after he

denied it so flatly why, I wasn't so sure."

"Neither was I," added Harry. "Why would he refuse to admit his identity?"

"For the best reason in the world," Bob promptly answered. "He doesn't want these crooks here to know what he was, is or has been; a detective!" He whispered the words.

"Then you think he is playing a part here?" asked Ned.

"I'm sure of it!" went on Bob, leaning over the table to bring his head close to those of his chums. They were like three conspirators as they consulted thus.

"He said," recalled Harry, his mind going back to the adventurous days of the Jint San, "that he was then after a certain man. Maybe one of the fellows who kidnapped us is that man."

"Maybe," assented Bob. "All I know is that we have seen Gilly Muzzlewig and he is working for these scoundrels."

"Maybe working them—instead of working *for* them," suggested Ned and his emphasis made the distinction plain.

"If he is," went on Harry, "that would account for him denying he knew us. There didn't appear to be anybody in his wireless room who could hear him, but I guess that Kranter was outside all the while."

"It's likely," Bob agreed.

"Then," Harry continued, "he may be planning to help us get away when he can do it safely.

What do you think, Bob? Take your time."

For a moment the young detective considered and then he answered slowly:

"While this man—I won't call him Gilly Muzzlewig yet—when he was talking to me, I thought I caught just the suggestion of a wink, or at least a funny look which might mean almost anything."

"Such as what?" suggested Harry.

"That we were to fall in with his denial, support it and help him to throw off the suspicions of Kranter or whoever else of the mysterious gang is on this island."

"Do you think there may be more of the gang than just the wireless man and Kranter?" inquired Ned.

"It's possible," Bob answered. "We don't know anything about this place. There may be half a dozen crooks concealed around here. But the more I think of it the more I am sure that Gilly—I'm going to call him that for a while—the more sure I am that he gave me a wink which might be a warning or a signal of hope."

"Hope is what we need," murmured Ned. "We are in Dutch so far on this game."

"But there'll be a way out, I'm sure!" Bob said. "As long as you fellows have a faint suspicion, as I have, that this wireless man is the same Gilly Muzzlewig who helped us before, I don't feel as lost as I did."

"Nor I," chimed in Ned.

"Unless," came from Harry, "he is playing

a double part. And I wouldn't be surprised."

"How do you mean—playing a double part?" asked Bob, quickly.

"Well, after we had cleaned up the Jint San mystery," explained Harry, "the funny chap we thought was just a button-bursting tramp said he was a detective. We believed him, but he may have been stringing us then. He may have been a crook all the while and now, in with a new bunch, may just have changed his occupation. He didn't say anything, before, about being a wireless man."

"There was no occasion for it," Bob said. "Of course it's right for us to be suspicious of everything that is happening to us, for we are in the hands of a desperate gang. But I do feel we can trust Gilly Muzzlewig—or whatever his name is."

"Well, we'll see how things turn out," came from Ned.

"Anyhow, they are feeding us well," remarked Harry as he took another piece of pie.

Having finished the meal, the boys, following Kranter's instructions, carried the dirty dishes to his kitchen. They found him busy over another meal in preparation.

"Put 'em down there and do as you please until night," he advised them. "Only," and there was a sinister smile on his face, "don't try to wade the swamp or swim the lake. And keep out of the wireless room. Otherwise you can do

as you please until the chief gets back or until I have word what to do with you."

"Who is this big chief you are speaking of?" asked Bob, venturing a shot.

"I told you not to ask questions!" snapped the cook. "And that goes for all of you!" His voice and manner changed and the prisoners decided it was best to humor him.

So they wandered about the island, getting, little by little, some distance away from the cabin that was their prison, and from the main building and the cook shack. The peninsula was shaped like a mushroom. On the head, or bulb, which extended into the lake, were the buildings and a small dock, though no boat was moored there. The stem, or shank, of the mushroom was long and narrow and ran in a twisted fashion, like a great snake, through the morass. There was black slimy water on each side of its fifteen feet or more of width.

"I wonder how far away they will let us go?" mused Bob as they walked along what seemed to be a faint trail.

"Let's try it!" proposed Ned, and Harry said:

"Fellows, maybe they're bluffing us! Maybe there is a way out of this swamp by this neck of land. Come on!"

Eagerly they pressed forward, tramping over the tangled underbrush. Several times they disturbed small alligators sleeping on the bank, and were startled as the saurians slumped into the

slimy depths of the swamp with mighty splashes.

Occasionally, too, they saw dark serpents, with curious white lips, gliding away.

"Cotton-mouths," whispered Ned. "I hate snakes!"

"And there's another copperhead!" warned Bob as a big one glided out almost from beneath Harry's feet. "They're more deadly than the cotton-mouths, I've heard." The brilliant yellow-and-black marked reptile was soon lost to sight amid the dead leaves.

"They're all deadly enough," agreed Ned. "Maybe we'd better go back, fellows."

"No, let's see if there isn't a way out!" proposed Bob.

They pressed on. Ahead of them was now heard a crackling in the bushes.

"Maybe that's a bear!" cried Harry.

But there suddenly confronted them a gigantic Negro, or perhaps a Seminole Indian, the boys could not be certain which. He had a rifle in his big hands and appeared to be guarding the trail. He smiled in grim fashion as he muttered:

"No come here! Go back!"

CHAPTER XXI

A VOICE IN THE NIGHT

BOB DEXTER glanced at his chums, shot another look to the big native and his gun, peered at the dark waters and gloomy forest all about them and remarked:

"Fellows, back we go!"

"I guess it will be healthier!" agreed Ned.

"No use tackling him—he has the advantage," added Harry.

They had a glimpse, through the bushes, of a sort of hut which was, evidently, the living quarters of this sentry. The black man grinned at the boys, though it could not be said whether in a friendly fashion because they had taken his warning so promptly, or in a manner to indicate that he was disappointed at not having a chance to take a pot-shot at them. But there was no mistaking his desire that they retreat.

"Go back!" he said again.

And the boys went back.

"Well, that's that!" remarked Bob when they had retreated along the trail and were out of sight, and probably hearing, of the giant, black guard.

"And enough!" murmured Ned.

"Plenty!" came from Harry.

"All the same," resumed Bob, "I believe there is a way of escape from this dismal swamp along that neck of land. I don't believe Kranter when he says we're on an island."

"I don't, either!" chimed in Ned.

"They wouldn't bother to keep a sentry there, to prevent prisoners from getting off that way if there was deep, or deadly, water at the end of the neck," argued Harry.

"Unless," suggested Bob, "they put this fellow there so prisoners, who hope to escape, will not come to their own deaths by *drowning* or from the *'gators* and *snakes*."

"That's an idea!" chuckled Ned. "But I don't believe the scoundrels that kidnapped us have any such humane motives. No, I'm inclined to think that there is a way off this mushroom that sticks out into the swamp, and they aren't going to let us take advantage of it."

With this the other boys finally agreed and on their way back to the shack they discussed the possibility of getting past the sentry.

"Or overpowering him," added Harry.

"What with?" Ned wanted to know. "We haven't a gun and he has."

"Maybe we could find a gun somewhere in the shack," Harry went on.

"Not much chance," Bob retorted. "Cheese it, fellows, here comes our cook-jailer. Don't let

him hear us plotting. It won't be healthy."

"He must know we would plot to get away from here," said Harry.

"Anybody would," added Ned.

Kranter advanced toward the boys, smiling.

"Well," he asked, "did you have a nice walk?"

"Fairly so," Bob answered, with a quick look at his chums.

"We didn't go far," added Ned.

"No, I didn't think you would," was the grim and significant comment. "Well, stick around here and it will soon be supper time. Time hangs on your hands after you've been on this swamp for a while."

"Have you been here long?" asked Harry.

Kranter shot him a quick glance. His sarcastic smile was replaced by a frown as he snapped out:

"I thought I warned you about asking questions!"

Then the pent-up anger of Bob Dexter broke out.

"Look here, you!" he exclaimed, striding forward and facing the man who was big and husky, "there's no call for you getting so nasty about it. My chums and I aren't here from choice and we'd be glad to leave any time. But as long as we're here you treat us decently and civilly or you'll be sorry for it! I'm tired of being browbeaten in this way and I'm not going to stand for it. Sure you told us not to ask questions, and maybe that's your right. If you don't want it

found out what a crook you are, and a bunch of crooks you're in with, of course you won't answer questions. But when we ask a casual one that doesn't mean anything—well, I'm sick of this—that's all!"

"So am I!" cried Ned.

"Count me in!" added Harry, both he and Ned being much heartened by Bob's bold defiance.

The change in Kranter was noticeable. He seemed to shrink and cringe as Bob added:

"You treat us decently or I'll tell the chief when he gets back."

"Oh, all right, boys! All right! I didn't mean any harm!" the man was actually apologetic now. "But I got orders not to answer any questions and so ——"

"Well, we aren't going to ask any leading questions," said Bob with a wink to his companions to indicate that, now they had the upper hand, at least in this respect, they must keep it. "But when we ask how long you've been here, or if we can have more salt or anything like that you ought to answer."

"I will, too—I'll answer anything if it hasn't to do with—with—well, with things that aren't to be talked about," finished Kranter a bit awkwardly. "I didn't mean any harm."

"All right," assented Bob as if he accepted this apology grudgingly. "That's enough. We'll be as decent as you are."

"And nobody could ask more, I'm sure!" agreed

the cook and he went off like a dog with its tail between its legs, cringingly.

"You got his number all right, Bob!" commented Ned, admiringly when they were back in their own particular cabin.

"I hope I did," and Bob smiled.

"You sure did! He had that coming to him!" went on Harry. "Maybe after this he won't be so fresh."

"I wish I had dared talk like that to the big black that stopped us in the woods," continued Bob.

"That would have been swell," agreed Ned.

"But he had a gun," commented Harry.

"Maybe Kranter did, too," Bob said. "I just didn't stop to think about it. He got my goat!"

"Well, now we have his so we're even," said Ned. "I wonder who this chief can be, anyhow?"

"One of the two foreign men who were on the plane," was Harry's opinion.

"I judge so," said Bob.

"And have you got any line yet on what it's all about?" Harry inquired of his detective chum.

"Nothing certain, no. Sometimes I feel as if I almost had my finger on the key and then it slips away from me. There are so many things that don't jibe."

"I still stick to my original theory," declared Harry, "that these crooks are rum-runners."

"Their wireless outfit down here in the swamp

would seem to indicate that," Bob agreed. "But I'm going to dig a little deeper into the mystery before I decide what it is."

They remained in and about the log cabin until Kranter brought their supper, which was even better than the other meal. The guard-cook had a very different manner from his former arrogant one as he set the food on the table.

The evening was rather a long and anxious one for the boys. There were electric lights in the cabin, the current for them and the wireless being supplied by a dynamo run by a gasolene engine. There were some old papers and magazines in the shack and these the boys read until they got sleepy. They went to the door, now and then, to look off into the gloomy swamp and up into the air, as if listening for the sound of the motors of the seaplane. But the croaking of frogs and the bellowing of alligators were the only sounds.

Having no night garments, the boys did not undress, but stretched out on the bunks, under the blankets, in their underwear. The night was warm.

It was Bob who was awakened, after how long a sleep he did not know, by a voice in the night. It came from a window near his bunk.

"Boys! Boys!" came the cautious call out of the darkness.

CHAPTER XXII

THE SUMMONS

UNCERTAIN, for the moment, whether or not it was a particularly vivid dream, Bob Dexter remained quietly on his bunk, staring toward the window the outlines of which he could barely see in the faint light of the stars that flittered down through the tangle of dead trees. He listened intently, heard the gentle, regular breathing of Harry and Ned and then again his ears caught the cautious accents.

"Boys! Boys! Are you awake?"

"Gilly!" whispered Bob, for he jumped to the conclusion that the detective they had met in the quest for the Jint San had at last decided to reveal himself. "Is that you, Mr. Muzzlewig?"

It was the only name the boys knew for the odd, button-scattering character though he admitted he had no right to the title.

"Yes, I'm here, Bob!" was the guarded reply. "Are your chums there?"

"Both here," Bob replied.

"What's going on?" asked Ned, suddenly sitting up on his bunk.

"Are they going to kidnap us again?" exclaimed

Harry, and he reached under his pillow, took out the flashlight he had there and switched it on.

"Douse that glim!" came sharply from the man outside the window. "Do you want to give the whole show away?"

"But what's up?" demanded Harry, as he complied with the request. The cabin was again plunged in darkness, Bob and his chums having had, during that momentary flash, brief glimpses one of the other. And Bob, awakening earlier than the other two, looked toward the open casement and saw the wireless operator peering into the cabin.

"It's all right," Bob answered in a low voice, listening, the while, to see if the indiscreet flashing of Harry's pocket torch had created any alarm. But the mushroom of solid land in the swamp was silent, and still shrouded in blackness. The only sounds were the intermittent ones made by the frogs and alligators. "It's all right, Harry. Gilly Muzzlewig has come to help us!"

"Then it was him!" murmured Ned.

"Yes, boys, I'm here," declared the voice they so well knew. And Bob and his chums listened, almost expecting to hear the rattle of flying buttons as the portly figure of the mysterious detective expanded under his breathing. But Gilly, as he must be called for some time yet, had evidently adopted a looser form of clothing so there was room for expansion. No buttons thudded to the ground as of yore.

"What's the game?" asked Ned. "Are you going to take us away from here, Mr. Muzzlewig?"

"Sorry, but I can't do that right away, my boy. It's very risky and sort of touch and go for me to come here now. I only have a few minutes to explain matters. I'm sorry I had to turn you down cold when you called on me this morning but it was the only safe way."

"We guessed that much," said Bob. "At least we hoped that was the explanation."

"It was. I didn't dare recognize you or let it be known that you knew me. There is a big game afoot here, boys, bigger than any of you have dreamed of, I guess. I'm after, now, the man I told you I was looking for when we met last year. I've been on his trail ever since and only now am I at all hopeful of closing in. Bringing you boys here made me think, at first, that the works were going to be all gummed up. But you may help me round up this gang."

"We'll do our best," Harry said.

"For the sake of my chums' curiosity, and my own reputation," spoke Bob, "will you say, Mr. Muzzlewig, whether or not this is a rum-running game."

"No, it isn't," was the whispered answer. "It's much bigger than rum-running."

"You win, Bob," Harry said after a pause.

"Sure! Got to hand it to him!" agreed Ned.

Mr. Muzzlewig gave a chuckling laugh.

"But I haven't got to the bottom of it all yet," Bob said. "Though with Mr. Muzzlewig to help ——"

"I can't promise you much help, boys," said the stout detective. "I have to work this capture in my own way, but you may be able to help me. What I sneaked out tonight to tell you was to stand by and be ready. I also wanted you to know I wasn't double-crossing you."

"We didn't know just what to think at first," Harry said.

"But what do you mean by standing by?" asked Bob. "We know you have a wireless station here, but ——"

"I mean," came the cautious whisper from the dark outside, "to stand by and be ready to go aboard the seaplane when it lands here again, as it may in a day or so."

"Stand by to go aboard!" exclaimed Bob. "Why, won't that be doing just what the kidnappers did to us? We'll be putting ourselves into their power again."

"Well, aren't you in their power now?" asked Mr. Muzzlewig. "Can you get off this island?"

He paused for an answer.

"Is it an island?" asked Harry.

"Almost. The neck of land connecting this bit to the main is very narrow. But it is guarded."

"Yes, we found that out," spoke Ned.

"Well, you have seen how dangerous, if not impossible, it is to get away from here. The

seaplane is your best and almost only chance."

"Then they will take us on board again?" asked Bob.

"No, I can't say they'll do that. But the seaplane will drop down on this lagoon again, very shortly. I want you to be ready, the night it comes, to slip out with me and board her."

"You mean without letting those two Dutchmen know?" asked Bob.

"That's it, exactly. But how did you know they were Dutchmen?"

"By their accent, I guess," Bob said. "I once knew a fellow from Holland."

"Well, you're right, some of this gang is from Holland. As for letting them know you are on the seaplane—no! You must get on board secretly."

"But how are we to manage it?" asked Ned.

"I'll manage it for you," offered Mr. Muzzlewig. "Just you stand by and be ready."

"We will!" promised Ned.

"Then I must go back now," went on Mr. Muzzlewig. "Even now my absence may be noted and Kranter will report it. Then I'll be suspected and my usefulness here will end. I have spent nearly a year worming my way into the confidence of this gang. It would be a pity to throw all that work away now. But I felt I must speak to you boys and warn you to be on the lookout."

"We will," Ned promised.

"And," went on the stout detective, "when you hear the plane coming and see it land on the lake, make up your minds that the following night you will be secretly on board, ready for whatever happens."

"What will happen?" asked Bob.

"Unless I am much mistaken, I shall round up this gang!" exclaimed Mr. Muzzlewig and he could not keep the satisfaction from his voice.

"Are you coming on board with us?" Ned inquired.

"Yes, I am also going to endeavor to conceal myself in the seaplane with you. At the proper time we'll spring the mine!"

"Good!" murmured Bob. "We'll be ready!"

"I'll come for you," the stout detective promised. "And now—quiet—don't make a sound!" he suddenly cautioned and Bob, who had gone to the window, the better to converse, saw Mr. Muzzlewig stoop down and crawl away, mingling with the blackness of the night.

The boys' friend must have heard some one approaching, and he got away just in time. A few seconds later Bob heard him speaking to Kranter and saying:

"Yes I was just looking around the shack where those lads are. I didn't want to take any chances on them getting out. You know how particular the chief is."

"Sure, I know!" Kranter replied. "And those

are bold lads. You should have heard them go for me!"

"I hope you went right back at them," Gilly Muzzlewig murmured in his capacity, now, as a friend of the crooks.

"Sure I did!" boasted Kranter. "I told them where they got off."

"The big stiff!" murmured Ned.

"What a bluff!" said Harry.

"Well, everything was all right over there, so I'm going back to bed," resumed the stout detective. See you in the morning, Kranter. The chief may fly in then."

"Did you have any word?"

"Only partial. But better be on the lookout."

"I will!"

The two separated, and the boys, after conversing in excited whispers and wondering what it was all about, went back to bed and, eventually, to sleep.

The solution of the mystery seemed near and Bob was going over many things in his mind, trying to fit together the pieces of the puzzle.

But if the boys had expected to observe the seaplane riding at anchor in the lagoon next morning they were disappointed. There was only the same dismal, gloomy swamp, with the same alligators, snakes, frogs; the big herons wading on their long legs.

The day dragged along. There was little to

see and less to do. Aside from wandering about in the limited area that was available, the boys could not go anywhere. Once Harry suggested that they walk down the neck and see if the big black was still on guard.

"But there's no point to that," Bob said. "He's there, very likely, and we might provoke him so that his gun would go off. Now that Mr. Muzzlewig has promised to smuggle us aboard the plane, so we can be taken away, I think he's our best bet."

"But will the plane come back here?" asked Ned.

"I think it is bound to," answered Bob.

"And if we do manage to get on board, without being discovered, where will they take us, eventually?" asked Ned.

"That I can't say," replied the young detective. "But with Gilly there to help us, I think we needn't worry. Anyhow, it seems the only way out of this prison."

"Oh, I'll take the chance!" declared Ned.

"Same here!" murmured Harry.

It was two evenings after that, when the boys had finished supper, that a throbbing was heard in the still air.

"There it comes!" exclaimed Ned.

"The bird of the night again," muttered Bob. "Now, boys, we must stand by!"

A little later the big plane splashed down into the lagoon, was anchored and a small boat put

out from it. In the boat were three men and they went in the main cabin. Soon was heard the spluttering of the wireless.

"Looks as if something was up!" whispered Bob.

They ate their supper. It grew darker. The boys sat expectantly on their bunks, waiting. Hours passed—long, wearisome hours—and then from the dark window came a cautious summons:

"Get ready, boys!"

CHAPTER XXIII

OVER THE SEA

EAGER and waiting as they were for this order, Bob and his chums jumped with nervous tension as it came to them. They had not undressed but had stretched out with all their garments on.

"Don't make any noise!" cautioned the voice coming from the dark void beyond the window, which only dimly showed in the gloom of the cabin. "But come on!"

Just for an instant Bob hesitated. Suppose there was something wrong? The voice seemed, surely, like that of Gilly Muzzlewig. But suppose he was not, after all, what he pretended to be? Or suppose this was not Gilly at all?

"It might be Kranter," thought Bob in a flash. "He may have caught on to what Gilly plans to do and have put him out of the way. Then, to get square with us, Kranter summons us out and shoots us on the pretense we are trying to escape. It would be like him!"

"I'm glad we're going to leave," murmured Harry. "This place was getting on my nerves!"

"Mine, too," added Ned. "But we may be jumping from the frying pan into the fire."

"What do you mean?" asked Harry as Bob, even while moving across the cabin floor in the darkness, was rapidly turning matters over in his mind.

"I mean," explained Ned in a low voice, "that we may be worse off in the seaplane, if we manage to sneak aboard, than we are here."

"How about that, Bob?" asked Harry.

"Lay low for a second, fellows!" cautioned Bob who was moving toward the window.

"What's the matter? Have they discovered us?" gasped Ned.

Bob did not reply. He had crawled to the window and now, against a little light of part of a moon that was struggling to pierce the clouds, he endeavored to see who had summoned them.

He caught a glimpse of the bulky form he knew so well just outside the cabin.

It was the button-scattering sleuth.

"All right fellows—come on!" whispered Bob.

"What was the matter?" asked Harry.

"I guess," chuckled Gilly Muzzlewig who, peering into the open window, had seen Bob's move, "he wanted to be sure who it was."

"Right!" Bob answered. "I don't like that Kranter."

"Neither do I," agreed Mr. Muzzlewig. "That's why I'm glad to put one over on him—as I hope I'm doing."

"What's he doing now, by the way?" asked Bob.

"Cleaning up after the feast those birds had," Gilly answered. "They're great eaters, those Dutchmen—fond of the table. They always want the best and plenty of it. They're half asleep now, over their cigars."

"Which gave you a good chance to slip out, I suppose," ventured Ned.

"Yes. I sent off some wireless messages for them. They'll be leaving here soon, in the seaplane and it will be well for us to be on board."

"But how can we get there—and hide away?" asked Bob.

"I don't know that we can," was the cool answer of Mr. Muzzlewig. "It's a chance we'll have to take—the only chance. I've been planning this for a long time; getting back at them this way. Only I figured on getting off by myself. Taking you three with me is a big risk. But once we get on board we'll be all right. It's a big plane and there are many hiding places."

"But won't they miss you?" asked Bob.

"No, I think not. After I finished with their code dispatches, which they have no idea I can read, I told them I was feeling a little under the weather and was going to take a long sleep. I've fixed up a dummy in my bed so if they go to look they'll think I'm there."

"Maybe we ought to do that," suggested Harry.

"No, they won't think you would try as bold a trick as this. They think they have you scared

from trying to leave this place and they're right in saying you never could cross the swamp or swim the lake. It's all true about the alligators and snakes."

"But we could have escaped by the trail through the woods; couldn't we?" asked Harry.

"Oh, yes, if you could have passed the man with the gun," said Mr. Muzzlewig grimly. "This is the only way, I think. Now my scheme is this. At present there is no one aboard the plane. The crooks are all on shore here eating or dozing. They plan to leave about midnight to pull off the biggest stunt of any they've attempted. So we can slip on board, I think, hide ourselves and, at the proper time, come out."

"But how are we going to get on board?" asked Bob. "If we take the boat they use we can't return it to the dock. They'll miss it and be suspicious."

"And I'm not going to try to swim out to that plane in the dark with the lagoon full of 'gators and snakes!" objected Harry.

"Nor I!" chimed in Ned.

"You won't have to!" chuckled the bulky detective. "I wouldn't do it myself. But I have prepared for this. I've been looking forward to it ever since I got on the trail of this gang and wormed myself into their confidences so they hired me for their wireless man. I have a raft hidden in the bushes. We can paddle to the plane on that and set it adrift. There's enough wind

to drift it away from the plane if we give it a parting push. And even if it is seen it will look like only some floating logs or alligators. Now come on, and don't make any noise."

Silently, cautiously and in a nervous tension of fear they made their way down to the morass. Mr. Muzzlewig seemed like a cat, able to find his way in the dark for, in a short time, he had guided the boys to a little cove where, moored under some bushes, was a rude raft.

"It's going to strain it for all four of us to get on at once," said the detective. "So I suggest that I take two of you over and come back for the third. I think that will be safer."

So it was arranged. Bob remained on shore while Ned and Harry were ferried out to the dark and silent seaplane. For a moment Mr. Muzzlewig hesitated as he neared it for, after all, his plans might be wrong. But as they approached, and cautiously made some test noises, there was no challenge of alarm.

"Get aboard and wait until I come back with Bob," said the sleuth.

In a short time all four were on board, the raft had been set adrift in the lake and, by the gleams of flashlights, carefully screened in their cupped hands, the boys and their friend secreted themselves in a place which Bob and his chums guessed was a sort of store room back of their former cabin.

"And now to see what happens," murmured

the big sleuth as they disposed themselves as comfortably as possible.

They did not have long to wait. Soon they heard movements and voices on shore. Lights shone in the shack and presently the splash of oars came across the water.

"They're coming!" whispered Gilly. "Now if they don't discover the dummy in my bed, and look in to see if you chaps are still there, we may succeed in this."

There was a tense few minutes, but at last came the question from a voice they recognized as Kranter's:

"All right!"

"All right!" replied some one aboard the plane: "See that those boys don't get away!"

"I'll watch them!" was the promise.

There were movements, now, aboard the plane. Clearly those in her were getting ready to start the motors. Soon they roared out in the night. The craft trembled, moved slowly, then faster and at length the secreted ones could feel that they were up in the air again.

On and on through the night the great seaplane roared on its way. Whither they were going the boys did not know, and they did not think it wise to speak and ask their friend. Their voices might be heard. It was a long night, an anxious night.

What would the morning bring?

The four were lying down in what seemed to

be part of the after fuselage of the plane. The quarters were rather confined but there was a window which gave ventilation.

And it was through this window that Bob first saw the gray light of the new day showing. Morning had come.

Yawning and stretching his cramped limbs, Bob rose and went to the window. It slid open and he looked out and down. As he did so a cry of wonder escaped him.

"What's the matter?" asked Ned.

"We're away out over the ocean!" Bob answered.

"That looks bad!" murmured Harry.

"Why so?" asked Bob.

"They must be going to drop us in to get rid of us," Harry went on. "I guess, fellows, we came from the frying pan into the fire!"

CHAPTER XXIV

FLOTSAM

"TAKE it easy, boys," advised Gilly Muzzlewig in a low voice. "Don't get excited. I don't believe they can hear us up forward, with all the noise the motors are making, but it's best to be careful. I don't believe they know we are on board. My plans have worked out fine, so far."

"Then," remarked Bob with a look at Harry, "if they don't know we are here they can't be going to drop us down into the sad sea waves," and he pointed below.

"Of course they aren't," said Mr. Muzzlewig. "They didn't come out here for that purpose at all."

"Then why did they come?" Ned wanted to know.

"Well, I fancy your friend Bob, from what he has said, has pretty nearly guessed the secret," answered the stout detective with a smile. "He may not have it just right, but he is 'warm,' as the children say."

"What is it, Bob?" asked Ned. "Go on, spill it like a good fellow!"

"I'd rather somebody would spill me a good

hot cup of coffee!" murmured Harry. "And something to eat. I say, we may be in a bad way here after all," he added, looking around their small prison compartment. "Most stowaways starve or die of thirst you know, and if I don't get something pretty soon I'll have to go out and give myself up to the captain, or chief, or whoever the head crook is. There's one thing I can't be set to doing, which falls to the lot of most stowaways on a ship," he concluded.

"What's that?" asked Bob.

"They can't make me swab down the decks!"

"No, but they might ask you to polish the propeller blades!" countered Mr. Muzzlewig. "No, don't go out and spill the beans yet. I have—something in reserve."

As he spoke he began fumbling in the pockets of his coat. Mr. Muzzlewig was a large person. When the boys had met him before he had worn garments too small for him so that, often when he merely took a long breath, his buttons would burst off. He now seemed dressed in a coat rather too large for him. But he had a method in this madness, if such it was.

For from one side he took some paper bundles which, when unwrapped, proved to contain sandwiches. And from the voluminous pockets on the other side of his coat Mr. Muzzlewig produced two ample thermos bottles, the tops of which were metal cups.

"Sandwiches and coffee, boys!" he announced

with the calmness of a stage magician producing a bowl of gold fish from the ear of a small boy.

"Hot dog!" exclaimed Harry who had the best appetite of the three chums.

"Not exactly," and Mr. Muzzlewig smiled. "But I hope these sandwiches will do as well."

"How did you think to bring them?" asked Ned.

"Well, I figured that we'd have to be stowaways for a time, if we succeeded at all in our plans, and I knew we'd be hungry and thirsty. Nobody who is hungry and thirsty can fight well so I managed to smuggle some things out of Kranter's kitchen, and I filled the thermos bottles. I have always had rather odd tastes as regards clothing," went on the stout detective, still smiling. "Doubtless you boys remember," he added.

"We sure do," Harry said in a mumbling voice for he had already begun on a sandwich.

"So when I came here, instead of wearing clothes too small I assume some too large. This gave me storage space and when I had my cargo of food and drink stowed on my person, if we had been caught as we were getting aboard, no suspicions would have attached to me as I look sloppy anyhow. I planned to say, if I happened to be caught, that I had followed you boys to capture you, and I would then be free to pursue my own way."

The chums looked at one another rather queerly on hearing how they might have been betrayed

and deserted. But Mr. Muzzlewig, sensing their thoughts, said:

"I knew I had to keep myself free to help you in case we were discovered when coming aboard. I didn't intend to leave you in the lurch. But I thought it wise not to seem to be a walking pantry. However it all turned out well."

"Yes, and it turns down well," remarked Harry with a chuckle as he drank some coffee.

"He will have his joke—and chicken livers!" murmured Ned.

"But you spoke of a possible fight," interposed Bob. "You said no one could fight well when hungry. Do you think we'll have a scrap here?"

"We may unless we can take them by surprise and bluff them out of a battle," the detective answered as he helped himself to some of the food, an example followed by Bob. "We'll make some plans as soon as we have eaten."

"It was a mighty good thing you brought this stuff along," Harry declared. "I feel a lot better now."

"Yes, hot coffee puts a little spunk in you," admitted Gilly.

All this time the plane, piloted by the mysterious gang aboard her, was moving over the sea. The boys looked from the single window of their prison room down at the heaving waves, but could not determine where they were. The air was warm, but this gave them no indication for it was the

middle of summer and the weather was as balmy up in New Jersey as it would have been in Florida.

"It's almost as calm as a mill-pond," Bob observed as he took another observation, following the final consumption of the food and drink. "Hardly any swell on. I suppose," he said to Mr. Muzzlewig, "this makes it all the better for their purposes."

Ned and Harry looked at their chum as he made this rather cryptic remark, and they were further puzzled when the stout detective said:

"I thought you had guessed it, Bob."

"Well, I'm not sure I have. But everything seems to point to a big ——"

"Wait!" begged Harry. "Let's see if I can't guess it. I say it's a big rum-running game! Am I right, Mr. Muzzlewig?"

"Not quite, though I have no doubt but what the members of this gang are friendly with rum-runners."

"Maybe Ned wants a shot at it," suggested Bob. "You fellows have as good a right to guess at it as I have."

"But you don't seem to *guess*," complained Ned with a smile. "You seem to *know* just what it is."

"If Bob can put his finger on it," stated Mr. Muzzlewig, "its because he has partly worked it out. Boys, he's a natural detective and there's no use denying it. In lots of ways he has me beat and I've been in the business for years."

"Oh, cut out the oil," murmured Bob, laugh-

ing. "I'm only an amateur and I always will be. But there were one or two things that happened which made me think ——"

"Wait a minute," begged Ned. "Don't spill the beans yet. I haven't had a shot at guessing."

"Oh, excuse me!" said Bob. "Well, what do you say this gang is trying to do?"

"Bring in illegal drugs from abroad," was Ned's surmise. "I mean what is often called 'dope'; the kind of stuff that criminals seem to crave and which causes such misery. The lid on dope is down too tight in the United States and they have to import it, so I have read. Though how these crooks manage it with this seaplane I don't see. Am I right?"

"Not exactly," answered Mr. Muzzlewig, "though you are closer to it than Ned was. Do you want to tell 'em yourself, Bob, or shall we wait until ——"

Mr. Muzzlewig stopped suddenly and held up a hand for caution. At the same moment the sound of voices and footsteps could be heard outside the hiding place of the four stowaways. It was evident that the motors were shut down, or their speed slowed, for the noise was less and the vibration of the craft was lessened considerably.

"They may have discovered us!" whispered Bob, looking around for some weapon.

"It seems so," went on Ned.

"Well, I'm ready to fight!" murmured Harry.

"I hardly think we shall have to fight—at once," Mr. Muzzlewig said. "And I don't believe they have discovered us. If they had they would have lost no time in breaking in here. But they have now gone up and down the passage several times, and haven't come near this door. Hence I argue they don't know we are in here."

It was true. Since the stout detective first held up his warning hand, the steps of several persons, or the same person going back and forth more than once, had been heard outside the little room. And there had been at least two voices in conversation, though the words were not to be distinguished.

"What I think is going to happen," went on Mr. Muzzlewig, "is that we are going to make a landing. That is if dropping down to the surface of the sea can be said to constitute a landing."

"Then something must have happened," argued Ned.

"You mean to the seaplane?" asked Harry. "Is it a forced landing?"

"I think not," Mr. Muzzlewig answered. "And nothing has happened yet but I think it is going to. Isn't that a steamer's smoke?" he asked, pointing out of the window.

"It is, and a big boat, too," Ned answered.

"Then we're slowing up to follow her," went on Mr. Muzzlewig. "What do you say, Bob?"

"It works out the way I thought it would."

"Why are we following that steamer?" asked Harry for now it was evident that the seaplane was trailing a big vessel that was moving rapidly along. But as the cruising speed of the airship was much more than that of the sea vessel, the engines of the plane had to be slowed.

"Going to take off a cargo of dope," Ned guessed.

"Well, I admit that I don't see how they can take off enough contraband liquor to make the business pay," Harry said.

"Boys, you're both wrong but you hate to admit it," said Mr. Muzzlewig with a smile. Since it was evident they were not to be discovered immediately, confidence had returned to the stowaways. "There's the stuff this gang is after."

He pointed to the sea below them. At one side of the steamer's wake, which they were following, could be seen a number of floating objects. They appeared to be toy balloons with upright sticks to which flags were attached.

"I was right!" murmured Bob. "There's the flotsam we are going to pick up."

"Flotsam! Flotsam!" exclaimed Ned, a new understanding coming to him.

"Say, you're all wrong!" said Harry as he saw the floating objects and flags. "Those are buoys to mark a line of lobster pots. Fellows, you're on the trail of Jed Bailey's lobster pots! Ha! Ha!"

CHAPTER XXV

WHITE STONES

BEFORE Harry's chums could quite realize what he had said, making a statement that might bring the whole case from the unknown to the ridiculous, there was a sudden increase in the speed of the plane.

"We're going up and away!" Ned exclaimed, for by this time they were quite close to the pond-like surface of the ocean.

"No, we're just getting ready for a landing," Gilly stated. "I have been out like this before, only then I was sending wireless for these crooks. I make every alternate trip," he added in explanation, "so I know what the procedure is. My relief is in charge now, which gave me a chance to smuggle myself and you on board. They always speed up the motors before making a descent. You'll see!"

In a few minutes more the seaplane, after circling about, and going up a bit, came down on a long slant and then with her motors running at half speed rested on the waters. The landing was skillfully done.

"But why all this fuss just to steal a few lob-

sters?" asked Harry who, it seemed, had dropped his rum-running theory. "Why not let Jed Bailey, or some other poor fisherman, haul up their own pots? Mighty small business, I think, robbing lobstermen."

"It isn't lobster pots!" said Bob with a laughing glance at Mr. Muzzlewig. "It's a lot bigger than that."

"But I'll leave it to Ned if those buoys and flags aren't a line of lobster pots!" Harry insisted.

"Looks like 'em," Ned agreed as they took turns peering from the small window, unseen by those aboard the seaplane.

"That's the intention—to make this flotsam look like lobster pots," Mr. Muzzlewig said. "But Bob and I know different."

"Yes," Bob went on, "those buoys, fellows, were just tossed off that steamer," and he pointed to the liner still progressing. "And the men aboard the plane here are going to pick them up. That's the flotsam I had in mind."

Still wondering what it was all about, Ned and Harry waited. They could look out and observe as the plane, riding easily over the water, approached the nearest floating buoy and flag. Then their view was cut off as the string of floating buoys was, evidently, being hauled in from the bow of the big craft. The structure of the plane was between the observers and the flotsam.

"Well, boys," said Mr. Muzzlewig as he again

began fishing in his voluminous pockets, "I guess the time has come for a fight. I am going to catch these crooks with the goods now. Are you with me?"

"Sure!" answered Bob, Ned and Harry in a chorus.

"Then take these—you may need 'em!" He passed each boy a grim, black automatic, retaining two for himself.

"Now I'll have my revenge!" Ned exclaimed, patting the weapon.

"Be careful!" warned the stout sleuth. "These men are desperate. But I think we shall take them by such surprise, when we cover them with our guns, that they'll see the foolishness of resistance and will cave in. Get all set now—we're going out!" he warned in a tense voice.

The boys gripped the automatics and braced themselves. Gilly Muzzlewig looked back at them as the three were grouped behind him when he stood at the door that gave egress from the compartment. What he saw seemed to satisfy the detective for he nodded with a grim smile and said:

"Let's go!"

They stepped softly out and found themselves in a long corridor, or passage, that seemed to extend on one side of the fuselage of the plane. The main cabin, the motor control room, the compartment for the engines and the cabin where the boys had previously been held prisoners were all

amidships of the plane. The room where they had been concealed one night was on the port side of the other space.

In a short time Bob and his chums, following Gilly's lead, found themselves in the main cabin. But it was deserted.

"They're all up front, taking in the flotsam," Bob said.

"What in the world is this flotsam?" demanded Ned.

"White stones," Bob answered and his chums were just as wise as before, but there was no time to say more for, at that moment, the forward door of the cabin opened and through it came several men. Two were the same foreigners the boys had met previously, a third member of the party was their former jailer, Hanker, but the fourth was a stranger. Each of the four held some dripping objects—objects wet with sea water —the same floating buoys and flags that Harry had thought marked lobster pots on the ocean bed.

Surprise, for the moment, held the four crooks silent. The looks on their faces would have caused laughter had the moment not been so fraught with possible tragedy. Then the taller of the two blond men snarled:

"You here, Carson! What does this mean? You were not to make this trip!"

"I know I wasn't, Van Blick," said Gilly Muz-

zlewig calmly, "but I sort of had a hankering to and ——"

"Van Blick!" cried the shorter of the two blonds. "You—you ——"

"Van Blick, alias Hofferner, alias Stubblemaier —and half a dozen other false names if you like!" broke in Mr. Muzzlewig with a stern manner the boys had never before observed. "The game's over—stick 'em up now, and do it fast and *drop those diamonds*!"

As he spoke he aimed his one automatic at the tall blond and a second weapon at his brother, and called:

"Cover 'em, boys!"

Bob and his chums were not a split second behind their detective friend in bringing their weapons into play. Like automatons the four men slowly raised their hands over their heads and dropped to the floor the dripping buoys they had just salvaged from the sea. The surprise had been complete. None of the gang had a chance to draw a gun.

"You—you double-crosser, Carson!" snarled the taller Van Blick. "You—you ——" and he began spluttering a string of Dutch that the boys could not understand.

"That's all right, Van Blick, alias Hofferner," said Mr. Muzzlewig calmly. "I've got you double-crossed all right. It's been a long trail but it's nearing the end now. I've got all the evi-

dence I want and I'm through with the case. Bob, if one of you boys will reach in the back lining of my coat you'll find there some wire to shackle these crooks."

"All right," Bob answered as he laid aside his weapon, at the same time cautioning his chums to still keep theirs aimed at the men. Mr. Muzzlewig, with his two guns, had the Van Blick brothers covered.

Bob drew the coils of wire from the detective's coat, which was like the tall hat of a stage magician in the variety of articles it had held. And then, under the command of Mr. Muzzlewig, first the elder and then the younger of the Van Blick brothers lowered their hands which Bob bound securely at the wrists with several turns of wire. They were made to sit down in chairs and then their ankles were shackled.

"There isn't any need to gag 'em," said Mr. Muzzlewig, as Bob finished binding the two other men. "It doesn't matter how much noise they make. I'll soon have officers from the steamer alongside to take charge of them."

"How are you going to get officers from the steamer here?" asked Ned while Bob and Harry wonderingly regarded the bound, silent and sullen men.

"By wireless," answered Gilly, calmly. "I'll go work it now and you boys can guard the prisoners."

"Sure!" murmured Bob, picking up his automatic again.

"You—you double-crosser!" shouted the elder Van Blick. "Golez! Golez!" he shouted. "That spy Carson is coming forward! Get him, Golez! Get him!"

Van Blick was evidently calling to another member of his gang in the engine room compartment.

"Don't strain your voice, Van Blick," advised Mr. Muzzlewig, in cool tones. "Golez is one of my men."

"Golez a double-crosser, too?" gasped the Dutchman, and again he ripped out a strong word in his own tongue.

"Yes," Mr. Muzzlewig assured him, "Golez is a double-crosser as you call him. Are you satisfied now?"

"The game is up," said the younger brother with a wry smile as he settled back in his chair. "I wish some one would give me a cigaret," he added, plaintively.

"One of you boys might oblige, if you don't mind," said the stout detective as he walked forward. "And I'll send Golez, as he is known, to pick up those diamonds," and he pointed to the buoys on the floor.

"Diamonds!" gasped Ned as Bob took some cigarets from a package on the table, put one between the lips of the younger Van Blick and

lighted it for him. The man puffed appreciatively, but as the other three members of the gang scowled angrily, and did not ask for smokes, Bob did not offer them.

"Diamonds!" cried Harry.

"The mystic white stones," Bob explained as a man they did not know came into the cabin. He introduced himself as Golez and began picking up the dripping buoys. They seemed to be made of thick rubber, like football bladders, well blown up and provided with a cord net to which was attached a square of cork and a small red flag on a stick. With his knife Golez slit open one bladder after another and revealed several boxes. When these were opened out came several small packets in pure white paper.

"Why," exclaimed Ned, "that's the kind of paper I saw when I looked in the window of the anchored seaplane!"

"This is the kind of paper diamonds are always wrapped in," Golez explained as he opened the remaining buoys. Some contained diamonds, and others held various precious stones, cut and uncut, so that the small table in the seaplane was a riot of beautiful color. And several of the bladder buoys yielded gem jewelry; pins, necklaces, earrings and bracelets of considerable value as far as the boys could judge.

"Quite a haul!" murmured Mr. Muzzlewig's aide.

"And did you know, Bob, that this secret was

going to turn out to be diamonds, all the while, instead of rum?" asked Harry.

"Well, I began to suspect it after those men spoke, that night, of white stones," Bob admitted. "It might have been only a pass-word, but it might, I reasoned, have meant diamonds, as it did. And when Ned spoke of seeing the white papers I was pretty sure. But I wasn't going to say anything for fear you fellows would have the laugh on me."

"Well, now it's on us," murmured Ned.

"No, it's on them!" chuckled Golez as he made a heap on the table of the gems and jewelry. He motioned to the prisoners.

"Joke! You double-crossers!" muttered the older Van Blick. "I—I ——"

"Oh, take it easy, Derik," advised his brother. "They can't hang us just for smuggling diamonds."

"Is that what they have been doing—smuggling diamonds?" asked Ned.

"That, and stealing them abroad," spoke Gilly Muzzlewig, coming back into the cabin. "I have just been in communication with the steamer," he went on. "They will stand by until we can go alongside and then they'll take charge of you," and he included the four prisoners with a wave of his hand.

"But how are we going up alongside of the steamer?" asked Ned. "The plane has stopped and ——"

"Golez will get it going again," said Mr. Muzzlewig calmly. "I am the wireless expert of this team and he is the mechanician," he said with a chuckle.

"Two double-crossers!" snarled the elder Van Blick.

"Oh, have a cigaret!" urged his brother but his advances were met with a scowl.

"I'll get going right away," said Golez, and while he went forward Mr. Muzzlewig, looking at the collection of jewels, explained what Bob and his chums had not already guessed.

The Van Blick brothers, and some other men, were the heads of a gang of international thieves and smugglers. Stolen gems and jewelry, acquired abroad, of course represented a larger margin of profit than diamonds and various stones which were bought much more cheaply in Holland and France than they can be in the United States. Once the gang's representatives abroad had a sufficient quantity of loot, word was sent in wireless code to Van Blick and his men on the American side. A man was sent with the stuff aboard a certain steamer.

Now precious stones and jewelry bought or stolen abroad cannot be entered into the United States except on payment of heavy customs duties. These duties bring the cost so high that the ornaments cannot be sold, profitably, in competition with United States goods; which is the object of the customs duty. But if the goods can be smug-

gled in and the payment of this duty evaded (as is often done) the profits are very large.

There is great risk in smuggling and it is hard to do, for the inspectors at the piers are up to almost every trick and device that can be tried. So it was calculated by the gang that if the stuff could be dropped at sea off a vessel before it docked and this flotsam could be picked up by others of the gang in waiting, it could easily be gotten into the country and disposed of.

That was the game Van Blick and his partners were engaged in. For over a year, Mr. Muzzlewig explained, the authorities had been trying to find out how so much jewelry that had not paid a duty got into the United States. Mr. Muzzlewig was called on, having had some experience with smugglers.

"I was trailing a man who got away from me and went inland, when I met you boys after the Jint San last year," said the stout detective. "I have been after him and this gang ever since. I had to change my make-up a bit and get a job as wireless man with them to do it."

"But you did it," complimented Bob.

"Yes, after a fashion. But you and your chums helped. For some time I couldn't figure out how the gang could successfully drop the diamonds overboard and have them picked up. But at last I found out. The seaplane and the floating buoys did the trick. The buoys looked like lobster pot markers, which fooled some of the customs men.

Van Blick in their land base, the dismal swamp, would get word, by wireless, when the steamer was expected. They would fly around in the seaplane until they picked her up. Then they let their contact man on board know by a code wireless message and at the proper time he secretly dropped the buoys over. He worked this from a lower deck near one of the ports where the cooks always throw overboard a lot of refuse as they get ready to dock. So there was little suspicion.

"Then the seaplane followed, like a gull picking up floating food, and gathered in the buoys of diamonds. They would be taken back to the swamp base and gradually disposed of. It's been a long trail but this is the end, boys."

"But why did they kidnap Ned and make prisoners of us?" asked Harry as they were nearing the steamer.

"Go on," Bob urged.

"I don't believe they wanted to do anything like that," said Mr. Muzzlewig. "It was forced on them. They had picked up a big lot of diamonds the night you boys tell me you were fishing at Belport, and then something went wrong and they had to put in at the inlet of Shark River. They had wirelessed for one of their gang to meet them there and they mistook you boys for him. That's why they gave the pass-word about white stones. And when they found out their error they were, naturally, alarmed and imagined the authorities were after them."

"And that we were customs men?" asked Ned.

"I fancy so. The star shells gave them a glance at your faces and by going ashore next day, and making inquiries, they easily learned who you were and where you were staying. Then came the kidnapping of Ned and all three of you would have been caught but for a chance."

"Was Jed Bailey in the plot?" asked Harry.

"No. That lobsterman may be a home-brew expert but that's all. He really believed you were crazy, Ned. And I think it was the intention of Van Blick and his crowd to have you boys kept prisoners only for a short time—until they could get away. But you kept after them and they had no choice but to carry you off with them. They wanted to smuggle in this last shipment—the biggest of all—but we got it," and Mr. Muzzlewig chuckled.

"Where was it they took us—to that dismal swamp of snakes and alligators?" asked Bob.

"It was somewhere in the south. I never dared go out enough to really locate the place," Mr. Muzzlewig said. "I had to play that I was in with the gang so I couldn't make too many inquiries."

"And will they get Kranter and that big Negro with the gun?" asked Ned.

"Oh, yes. The whole gang will be rounded up now, but those chaps down in the swamp camp don't matter. The two Van Blicks and Hanker, together with the steamer men and the gang

abroad, are the chief crooks. They'll be rounded up."

"Well, then," remarked Harry as the craft stopped near the waiting steamer from which a launch had put out, "I guess this is the end of the seaplane mystery."

"Yes," Bob said with a smile, "I guess it is."

"And I want to congratulate you, Bob Dexter," spoke Mr. Muzzlewig. "You did a fine piece of work!"

"Why," protested Bob, "I didn't do anything!"

"Oh, yes you did!" his chums assured him.

Officers from the steamer took charge of the prisoners and the gems and jewelry, the value going close to a million dollars, it was learned later.

"But what's to become of this seaplane?" asked Bob as he and his chums, with Mr. Muzzlewig and the mechanic, were left on board. The detective had told the steamship officers he would soon follow them to New York.

"Well, I think we might as well run it into Shark River inlet," said the stout detective.

"Are we near there?" asked Bob, in some surprise.

"Not so far from it. If you boys don't mind, I'd like to spend a few days with you—you say you have a cottage."

"Sure, we have a pretty decent shack," Ned answered. "Come on up—we'll be glad to have you."

"Delighted!" murmured Harry.

"It will be a relief not to have to think twice about every word I speak," said the detective. "I'm glad that gang is rounded up. All right, Golez! Head for Shark River!"

And a little later the seaplane dropped down in the quiet waters, not far from the boys' cottage. They went ashore and Bob said:

"I'll go get some lobsters at Jed Bailey's. Like lobsters, Mr. Muzzlewig—or whatever your name is?"

"Never mind my name—get the lobsters!" was the chuckling answer. "I'm fond of 'em."

"And see if he has any chicken livers for Harry!" suggested Ned.

"Oh, cut it out!" Harry protested.

A little later they sat down to a wonderful meal and to it Mr. Muzzlewig did full justice.

"I—I haven't felt like this since you boys solved the secret of the Jint San," he remarked as he pushed back his chair. "I—oh, there it goes!" he cried as a button burst from his coat and tinkled to the floor.

"This is like old times!" exclaimed Ned.

"Sure is," echoed Harry. "Bob, what mystery are you going after next?"

"I'm going to try and find out why you like chicken livers," was the answer, and then Bob had to dodge half a loaf of bread his chum threw at him.

With the arrest of the Van Blick gang and

the confiscation of the loot of valuable stones and jewelry, the smuggling fraternity received a body blow. Several of the crooks abroad were arrested, but some escaped the net.

"But I'm satisfied," said Mr. Muzzlewig a few days later as he went to New York and customs men took charge of the valuable seaplane.

"So are we," murmured Bob. "Now, fellows, I'll get the *Dolphin* again and we'll finish our vacation!"

Which they proceeded to do.

THE END

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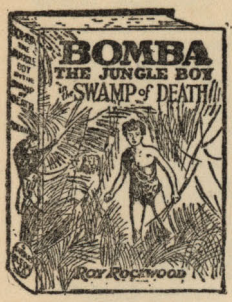

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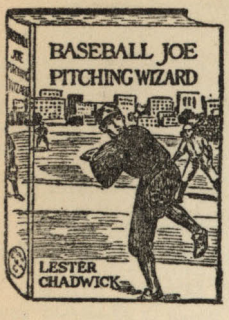

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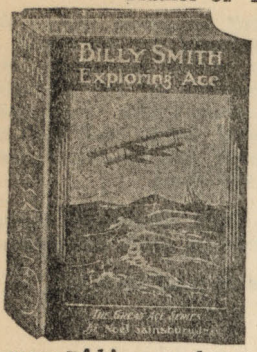

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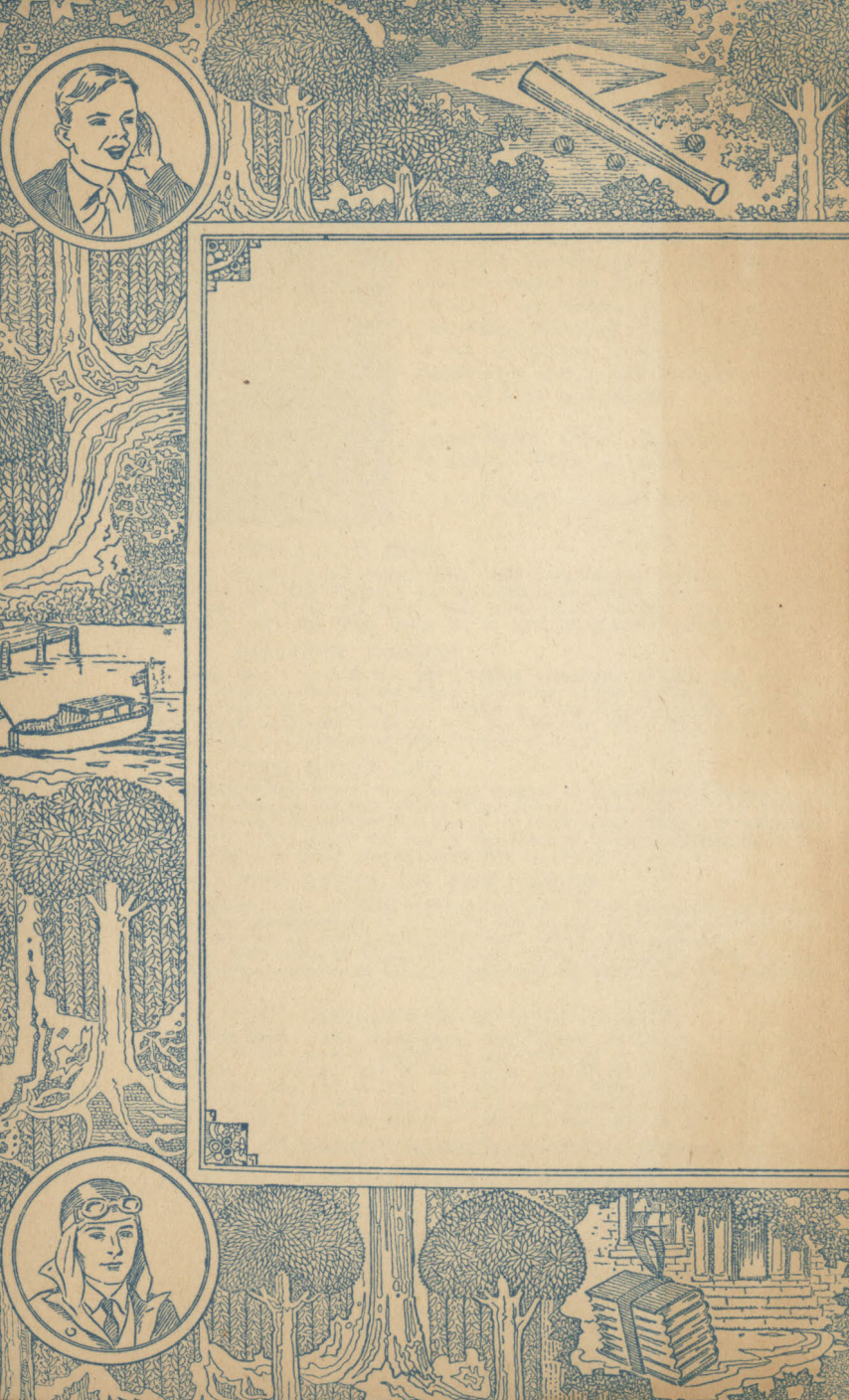
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